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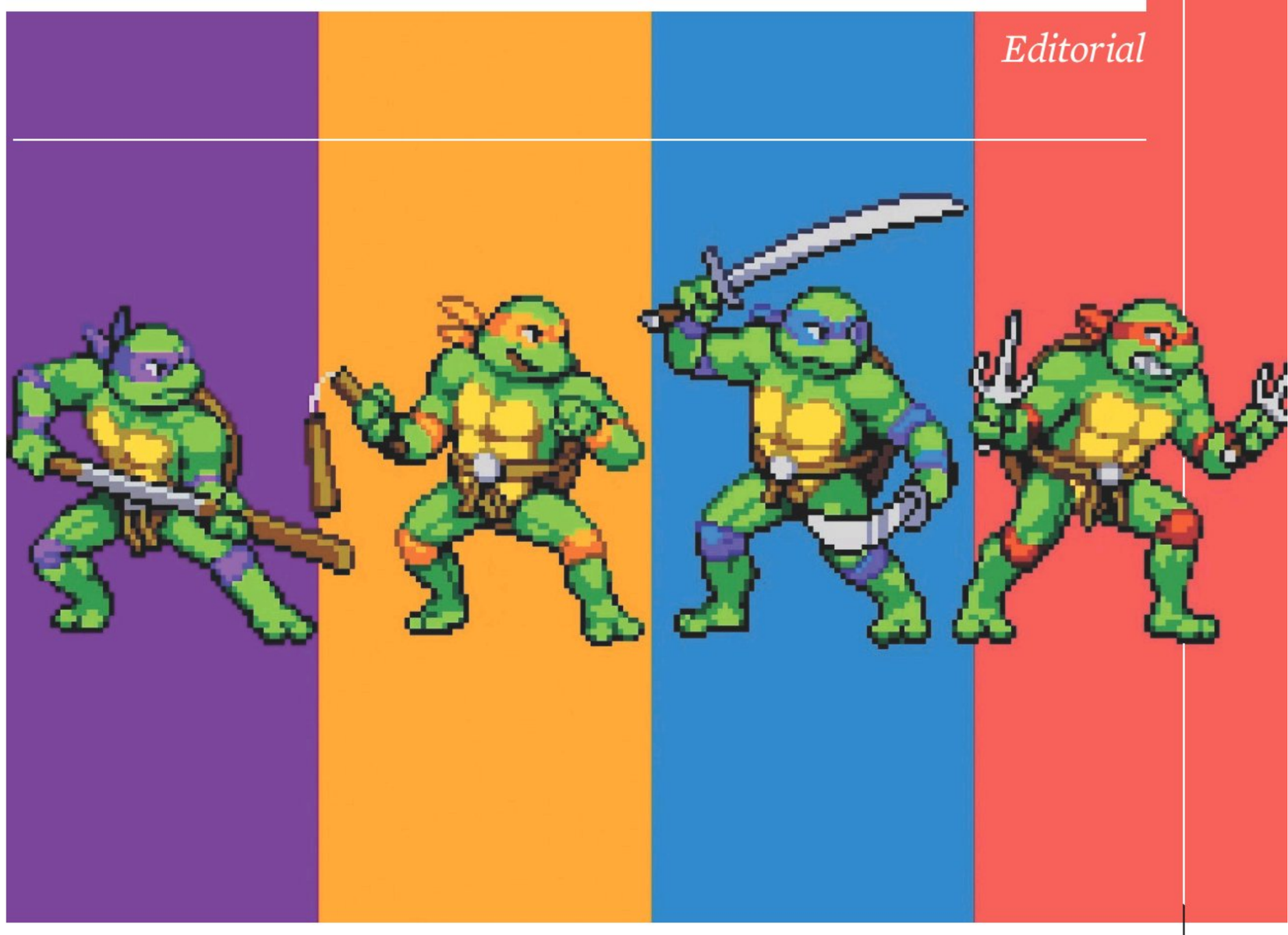

BODACIOUS!

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (gotta love a name that is also a succint pitch document) emerged in the 1980s as a huge licensing extravaganza. Success in the comics field led to multiple TV series, an outrageously popular line of action figures (I had the one with the swords, but am not such a fan that I can even remember which one that was), and even pen & paper roleplaying games. Soon after the property made the leap to video games, and like the ongoing popularity of the four pubescent turtles and one very old rat, those video games are still coming.

Shredder's Revenge is, like the turtles themselves these days, a pure hit of side-scrolling, fighting game nostalgia. It's our cover preview this month, but the game that's really got me excited is Nightingale.

I've never been a fan of construction & survival games, generally, but two years of pandemic has totally switched me on to the genre. Through games like Raft, Seven Days to Die, and Valheim, I've been able to maintain contact through two lockdowns and various other traumas. I've even made new friends, as well as building entirely new – and Covid-free – virtual worlds. The games I mentioned are all good, but they all lack in the hat area... and Nightingame promises not just a LOT of hats, but *bowler* hats as well.

And they say the perfect game doesn't exist.

David Hollingworth

"Shredder's Revenge is, like the turtles themselves, a pure hit of side-scrolling, fighting game nostalgia."

WELCOME

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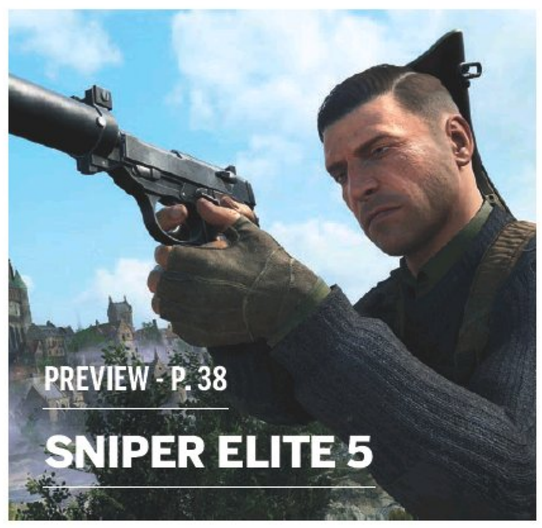

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QA workers on Dragon Age 4 have applied to form a union

Days after Raven QA got the green light to go forward with their union vote, another QA unit working with a big developer has moved to unionise. This time, contractors doing QA for Bioware have applied to form a union. A representative of the group told Game Developer that its members could no longer bear "struggling to make ends meet" working on Bioware's games.

Star Wars: The Old Republic finally lets you change your weapon's appearance

While players have been able to customise their outfits since the Rise of the Emperor update way back in 2015, weapons were excluded from the Outfitter feature. In April, the 7.0.2 update expands the Outfitter to include weapons. It works the same way as armour: select one of your outfits in the Outfitter tab, and then grab the weapon with the appearance you want from your inventory, dropping it into the appropriate slot.

WINDOWS 11 GETS NEW AUTO HDR SLIDERS AND GAME PROFILES

Fine control over your HDR settings sounds like a huge win.

According to Sweclockers, Microsoft is releasing a slider for the Auto HDR feature in Windows and what a time it is to be alive. The slider works through the Windows settings menu but can also be adjusted on the fly if you're using the Xbox Game Bar.

This could be great for some games that are still a bit experimental in their usage and might need to be adjusted in case by case scenarios. Most you'd hope to be able to set and forget, and there's more good news there too. The new slider can even save settings to game profiles so you can really dial in the games you play most often to have the best level of HDR for them.

Given the surge in HDR popularity it makes sense that Microsoft is optimising Windows 11 to take full advantage. There's even a calibration tool, and more settings are said to come in the future. Given how good gaming can look in HDR when done right, this is a really appreciated development alongside other new neat features like improved renewable energy use and moving icons.

Valheim's mistlands tease some ancient, bronze-bound stone ruins

And a cute rabbit.

The developers over at Iron Gate AB continue work apace on Valheim's Mistlands update, posting a new developer diary on Steam. (Though I'm sure they also took a small break and celebrated when the game hit 10 million copies sold.)

The diary, titled "Ancient Ruins Unearthed," includes an impressive look at some cyclopean stone ruins that will populate the Mistlands. We've seen their like before, in the swamps and half-built mountain towers, but those had a decidedly more grounded look. The massive ruins teased for Mistlands, however, are huge stone blocks bound in bronze bands riveted to the stone. They're somehow much more otherworldly than what other ruins Vikings have found around Valheim.

For my part, I'm wondering how these big ruins have anything to do with the equally-big spiders lurking about.

Alongside that, Valheim's team also posted a tease they stealth-released on social media. It's a little hare, an adorable thing that'll wander the Mistlands year round.

RAZER CO-FOUNDER AND CHAMPION OF THE GAMING MOUSE ROBERT 'RAZERGUY' KRAKOFF HAS DIED

RazerGuy was a staple of the early 2000s in gaming and a tireless advocate of specialty mice, keyboards, and headsets.

Razer co-founder Robert Krakoff, known as RazerGuy across the internet, has died at the age of 81, reports the company. He died April 26, 2022.

Krakoff was a key player in bringing the first dedicated gaming mouse, what would later become the Razer Boomslang, to market. When the first company making the Boomslang went bankrupt he co-founded Razer alongside current CEO Min-Lian Tan in 2005.

"We are saddened by the passing of Co-Founder and President Emeritus, Robert Krakoff, known by everyone as RazerGuy. Robert's unwavering drive and passion for gaming lives on and continues to inspire all of us," said Razer in a Tweet and a statement on its site.

RazerGuy was known broadly among the community as a kind and approachable person, one who took players, enthusiasts, and professionals seriously no matter their level of fame. Early Razer products included a message from RazerGuy alongside his email address - razerguy@razerzone - soliciting direct feedback.

VESA will introduce two certification tiers, they are: MediaSync Display and Adaptive-Sync Display. A MediaSync Display is "designed for jitter-free media playback supporting all international broadcast video formats." While an AdaptiveSync Display "guarantees higher refresh rates and low latency, optimised for gaming, plus a lab-certified max refresh rate so you know your display's full potential."

Next gen GPUs are set to offer dramatic compute performance gains

100 TFLOPS is possible, over 2x higher than current high end cards.

Now that next generation high end GPUs are reaching the end of their design phase and entering the testing phase, we're getting more and more little bits of information as we get closer to the launches of the cards later in 2022.

The newest rumours suggest that Nvidia's next generation AD102 GPU could produce more than 100 TFLOPS of computer performance, which is more than double that of an RTX 3090 Ti. The info comes via a twitter discussion between serial and reliable leakers, Greymon55 and Kopite7kimi.

A TFLOP is one trillion floating-point operations per second. It's a measurement of the mathematical performance of a processor. A higher number doesn't necessarily translate into better gaming performance, but having higher floating-point capabilities means that game developers have more resources to work with, though other factors in the system create their own bottlenecks. Raw shader performance is an advantage, but it's only one part of the GPU.

This RTX 3090 Ti is cooled by no less than five fans

Asus' triple fan TUF cooler might be huge, but why settle for three fans when you can include a 240mm AIO as well? Japanese PC maker Sycom can build you a system with an RTX 3090 Ti that comes with a triple fan air cooler and a 240mm AIO. Yes, that's a graphics card with five fans. The Sycom GeForce RTX 3090 Ti comes an Asetek 240mm radiator that's cooled by a pair of excellent Noctua NF-A12x25 ULN fans.

THE SPY

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

What's the deal with *Half-Life 3*? No, stop, this isn't the opener for some kind of stand-up routine. The Spy isn't wildly gesticulating and putting undue emphasis on the words 'what' and 'deal' in the attempt to convey the inherent absurdity of an otherwise mundane annoyance for comedic effect. The Spy's brief tour of the open mic circuit was long ago, and The Spy thinks it's rude that you would even bring it up.

Earnestly, then, what *is* the deal with *Half-Life 3*? Or, more accurately, what's the deal with the internet's reaction to the continued lack of news about *Half-Life 3*? The absence of information used to be a big deal. Even just a few years ago, the comments of completely unrelated gaming news stories would be filled with '*Half-Life 3* confirmed' memes. The anticipation was *palpable*, as if every moment fizzled with the knowledge that *Half-Life 3* could be announced at any moment.

But then, without warning, it stopped. There was no inciting drama. No memo was circulated. Simultaneously, it seems, everyone just decided to let it go. Our collective innocence died and nothing was ever the same. Even the release of *Half-Life: Alyx* didn't reverse this phenomenon – if anything, it compounded it. Now the internet spends its days cycling through insincere arguments about difficulty modes, crunch, or whether game engines are just vibes. This is progress, but not necessarily the good kind.

LETTING OFF STEAM

Arguably the biggest contributor to the death of *Half-Life 3* hype was the perception that Valve no longer releases games. This is despite the fact that Valve does sometimes release a game – just weirdly, and with less impact than before. *Half-Life: Alyx* is great, but neutered by being a VR exclusive. *Dota Underlords* is a game that you only remembered when you read its name earlier in this sentence – and will have forgotten by the time you turn a few pages. *Aperture Desk Job* was released without warning, mostly as a Steam Deck tech demo.

But *Aperture Desk Job* is also a chance to root around some Valve code, looking for clues about upcoming games. Dataminer Tyler McVicker did just that, and discovered references to what might be other projects in development at the studio.

McVicker claims that four titles are referred to in the code. Three of them – a follow-up to *Half-Life 3*, a previously cancelled *Portal*-adjacent puzzler called *F-Stop*, and a Source 2 port of *CS:GO* – strike The Spy as especially tenuous. These are a small number of minor references that don't necessarily suggest anything. The fourth – *Citadel* – seems more substantive, although that has little bearing on whether or not it's in active development. *Citadel* has long been rumoured – most often by McVickers himself, who claims it's a team-based RTS/FPS hybrid. Much of the code comments found with *Aperture Desk Job* detail AI interactions and equippable abilities and weapons.

Valve, for its part, issued the following statement in response to a previous McVickers rumour that claimed *Citadel* was being made with Steam Deck in mind, "We think it's important to reiterate that while Tyler is a passionate gamer, he has no inside information about what goes on at Valve." *Half-Life 3* confirmed? Spy out. ■

The Spy

OUR COLLECTIVE INNOCENCE DIED AND NOTHING WAS EVER THE SAME

THE SPY
The Spy has not been officially announced.

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UBI TORONTO WORKED ON FIVE DIFFERENT GAMES – BUT MOST NEVER MATERIALISED

SPLINTER FACTION

UBISOFT TORONTO is still fighting to build a reputation it can be proud of.

It is the blessing and the curse of the younger sibling. On the one hand, the benefit of walking on ground already broken by the elder child, pre-flattened for ease of passage. On the other, the identity-smothering disappointment of the hand-me-down.

Ubisoft Toronto was built in the shadow of the publisher's flagship studio in Montreal – an enormous ideas factory responsible for *Splinter Cell*, *Prince of Persia,* and *Assassin's Creed*, the very foundations of the Ubi empire. Montreal's brightest lights were sent to Ontario's capital to establish the new outpost: producer extraordinaire Jade Raymond, who has since specialised in manifesting AAA studios, and the creative director Maxime Béland.

The latter brought with him a blueprint for what was, back in 2010, a shockingly modern take on the stealth game. At Ubi Montreal, Béland had led development on *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, a series reboot that had applied his experience with *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, a cover shooter, to espionage. The result was a game that played with light and shadow, but paradoxically hinged on a move called 'mark and execute' – which saw Sam Fisher plug enemies in slo-mo as if they were melons lined up on a plank of wood. *Conviction* was acclaimed but controversial – a wobbly and dangerous jumping off point for a new studio.

Yet in making its follow-up, Ubi Toronto proved a talent for consolidation. *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* neither reversed *Conviction*'s bold changes, nor doubled down on its aggression at the expense of other approaches. Instead, it folded in the tools of traditional *Splinter Cell* – body-hiding, non-lethal zappings and the ability to scout an upcoming room by sliding a sneaky snake cam beneath the door.

After Fisher saved the president in a scruffy jumper in *Conviction*, *Blacklist* recommitted to the gadget fantasy of Tom Clancy – and in a stroke of genius, gifted Fisher a personal plane to act as a mobile, *Mass Effect*-style hub. It remains a deeply underrated high point for the series, and ground zero for an important realisation: *Conviction*'s cover stealth wasn't a weird one-off, but a foundation for Ubi's future.

ATLAS SHRUGGED

In the aftermath, a ballooning Ubi Toronto worked on five different games – but most never materialised. The first, *Far Cry 5*, was led by Montreal, with areas of its map delegated to Toronto; studio veteran Navid Khavari recently told me about the "love and effort" that went into telling the story of its Whitetail Mountains region, where Hope County militias fought a "pre-existing war". The second was *Starlink: Battle for Atlas* – a toys-to-life project no doubt greenlit as Ubi eyed the success of *Skylanders* and *Disney Infinity*. By the time it came out, however, the fad was fading. *Starlink* quickly sank, and with it Ubi Toronto's chance of building a universe of its own.

Worse, Ubi Toronto's very identity came into question when, in the summer of 2020, over 100 employees wrote to studio management with "grave concerns about ongoing reported harassment and an inability to feel safe or protected within our own studio". Around the same time, Béland in particular was accused of inappropriate workplace behaviour – including the alleged choking of a female colleague at a work party. He has since resigned from Ubisoft.

While the studio reckoned with the consequences of what Kotaku called a "party culture", Ubi Toronto tapped into its creative history in an attempt to build a more positive legacy. Handed another Montreal property, *Watch Dogs*, the studio threw out the car chase mechanics left over from its origins as a *Driver* game – instead focusing on the non-lethal cover stealth that had

BACK TO BLACK

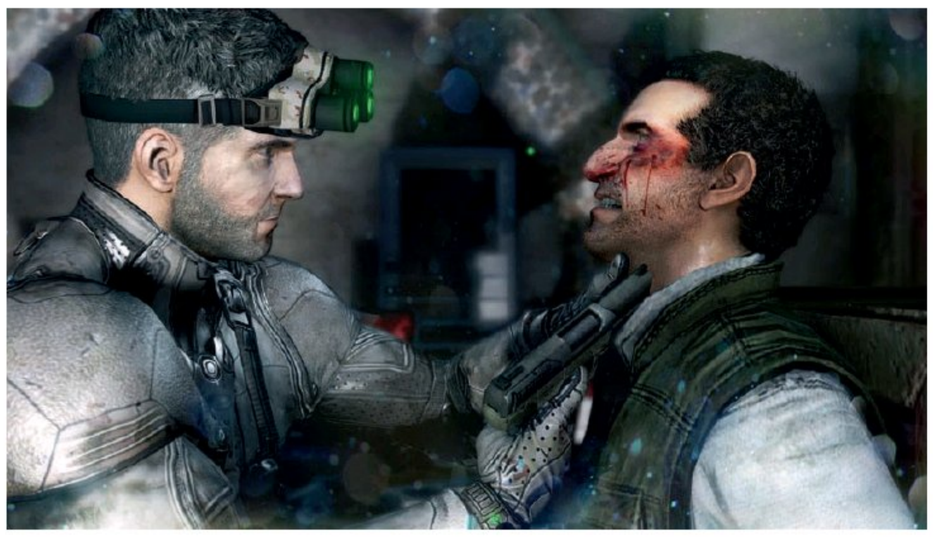
Key quotes on the* Splinter Cell *remake

"The last couple of games all of us have worked on have been really big worlds, whereas what I love about a *Splinter Cell* map is every square inch represents intentionality."

"It's important for us to support players who observe the situations, make their plan, use their gadgets, and outsmart the enemy creatively to deal with the challenges."

"Seeing your mastery put on display at the end of things, especially when you go through with no alarms triggered – that's a big part of the *Splinter Cell* experience."

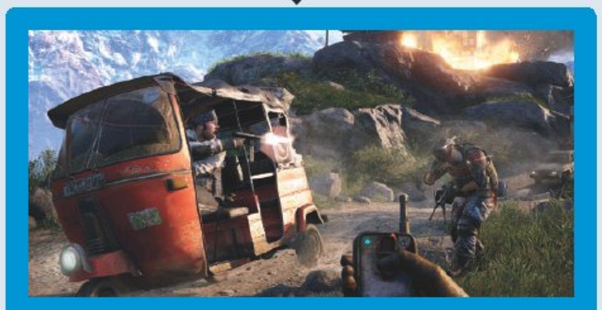
BELOW: *Blacklist* was misrepresented by a marketing campaign heavy on the explosions.



Gaming's lineages explored

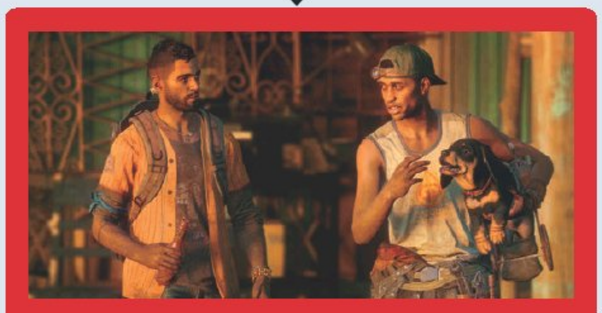
KEY
- Ubisoft Toronto
- Ubisoft Montreal

FAR CRY 3
The moment Ubi cracked the formula.



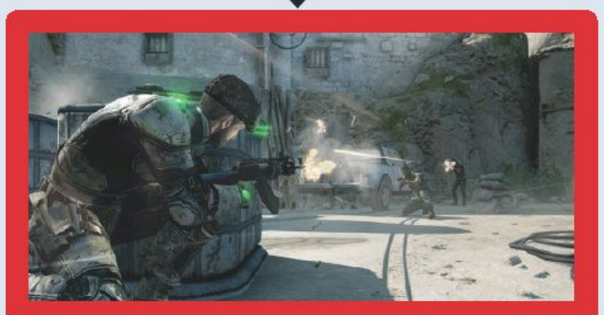
FAR CRY 4
Had the best villain, and angry wildlife.

FAR CRY 5
Ubi Toronto contributed to filling out Hope County.

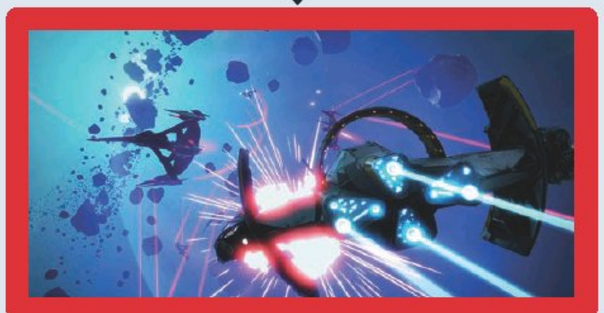


FAR CRY 6
Slick, smart, and overly familiar.

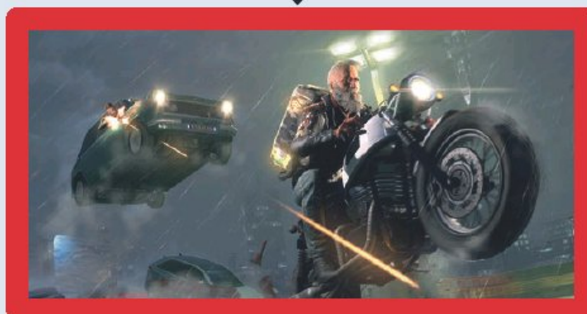
SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION
Sam Fisher became newly aggressive and mobile.



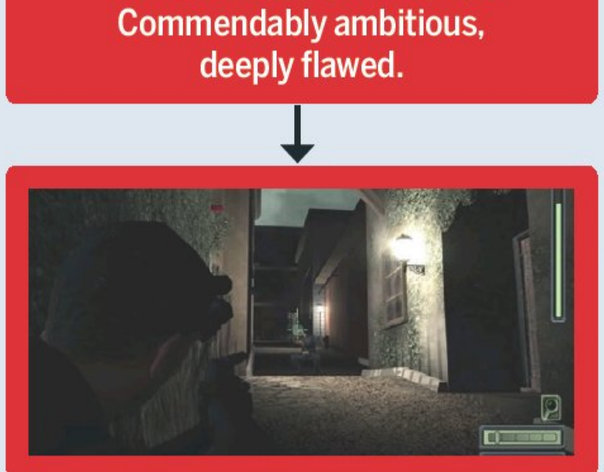
SPLINTER CELL: BLACKLIST
A considered follow-up that respected the past.



STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS
Arrived too late to take on *Skylanders*.

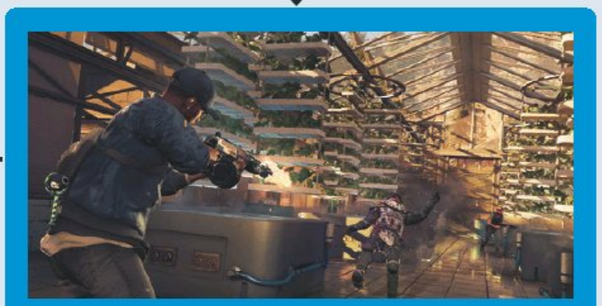


WATCH DOGS: LEGION
Commendably ambitious, deeply flawed.



SPLINTER CELL REMAKE
The original, rebuilt for the 2020s.

WATCH DOGS
Stealth, hacking, and driving in one package.



WATCH DOGS 2
The surprisingly sweet series high point.

COVERT ACTION

The creeping progress of a stealth specialist

defined *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*. The result was *Legion*, a game that prided itself on options, filling London with police stations that could be infiltrated in uniform, shot up by a rogue MI6 agent, or simply circumvented on the back of a flying drone. The greatest expression of its freedom of approach was the play-as-anyone system – masterminded by another Montreal veteran, *Far Cry 2* director Clint Hocking – which allowed you to recruit any NPC as a protagonist.

NOT-SO-NEW CLOTHES

The sweat and thought that had gone into that system was palpable – accounting for every random car accident in a great unseen spreadsheet which instantly informs relatives, and recorded the attitudes of those relatives towards your hacker collective, DedSec. But there was a sense that the system was only partially connected to your play experience – as if some wires were missing or sparking – and the consequences of your actions were often unfelt. The sacrifices made for its implementation, meanwhile, were huge – clunky conversations and a plot crafted to fit literally any character, eliminating any chance of the specificity or character development that drives any great story.

Ubi Toronto swung in the other direction for *Far Cry 6* – putting a single protagonist front and centre by plumping for out-of-body cutscenes in a series that had always been resolutely first-person. It backed up the decision by stuffing the game with incidentally-triggered dialogue that ensured you could never forget you were playing as Dani Rojas – a charmingly flawed hothead who always sang along to Camila Cabello's Havana when it came on in the car. But the new perspective added unwanted distance, too: you never quite believed you were in the same room as *Far Cry 6*'s villain, played by the great Giancarlo Esposito.

ABOVE: Don't worry, the authorities can't see that incriminating line.

OVERALL, FAR CRY 6 COULD HAVE DONE WITH MORE EXPERIMENTATION

A more serious misstep was the loot-shooter gear system, which broke apart the series's marvellous moveset to dole out perks piecemeal with boots and scarves. Overall, *Far Cry 6* could have done with more experimentation, not less. As yet another hand-me-down from Montreal, *Far Cry* wasn't just pre-worn, but pre-worn-out – in need of a reboot to address the fatigue.

From the sounds of it, Ubi Toronto will get a chance at just that with its very first dance partner, *Splinter Cell*. The studio has started work on a remake of the original 2002 stealth classic in a next-gen engine, eschewing open worlds to refocus on linear ghosting challenges. Sure, it's a second-hand project in a long line of inherited ideas – but one that has the potential to feel 'nearly new', rather than frayed and unravelling. ■

Jeremy Peel

Molotov's not gonna do much good. Best way to deal with a C-68 is C4.

Without *King's Field*, there would be no *Elden Ring*.

FROM THE FIELDS

Fans are still making sequels to FromSoftware's '90s RPG series **KING'S FIELD**

Finding the Eye of Horus and placing it on an altar in *Trismegistus* is an unforgettable event. The entire world fades away before returning as a warped version of itself, cloaked in ominous purple hues. It feels like the kind of trick *Trismegistus* just shouldn't be able to pull off, considering how it was made: as an original adventure built with the 22-year-old *Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool*, a dungeon crawler construction set released on PC by FromSoftware long before *Dark Souls* or *Elden Ring*.

Building a game with FromSoftware's ancient tools took creator Thomas Eversole "multiple hours out of each day" over six months of toil. The effort shows. Strange monsters await your move on a chess-like floor. Serene pools are replaced with fiery lava. The playable duality only becomes more impressive when you realise that travelling back and forth between these skewed reflections is the only way to make any headway. It's the kind of tricky design FromSoftware would appreciate.

FIELD WORK

These days being made to wander decaying, obtuse worlds bursting with secrets and unforgiving bouts of combat almost surely means you're playing one of FromSoftware's *Souls* games. Its PlayStation-born *King's Field* series, which began in the '90s, paved the way for FromSoftware's later successes. Their blocky models and short draw distances – forgivable considering the original debuted the same year 16-bit console owners were rushing out to buy *NBA Jam* – gave *King's Field* not only a distinctive look but also an almost symbolic visual language of its very own. Its worlds existed in a dreamlike state somewhere between being perfectly understandable and eternally inscrutable; herbs, chests, and people always immediately recognisable yet never given enough detail to stop our imaginations from eagerly filling in the blanks.

Everything we have collectively come to cherish in *Dark Souls* and now *Elden Ring* can be traced back to these earlier games: they're demanding, stubbornly refuse to give up anything without a fight, aren't afraid to inconvenience anyone playing... and by some arcane magic, that makes them utterly irresistible.

That magic was carefully preserved in the collection of models, textures, settings, and capabilities FromSoftware included in *Sword of Moonlight*, released for Windows in Japan in 2000. The software appropriately seems to have just as many quirks as the series it came from. "The limitations I encountered all seemed to have an alternative to bypass [it]," says Eversole. "*Sword of Moonlight* seemed to have a problem with DirectX hardware acceleration

Knives out

The editor draws its unusual name from the powerful sword first seen in 1994's *King's Field* and then found in some slightly redesigned and renamed form in every game in the modern *Souls* series. Always powerful and difficult to acquire, the striking turquoise blade is sure to help anyone who can survive FromSoftware's harsh landscapes long enough to find it.

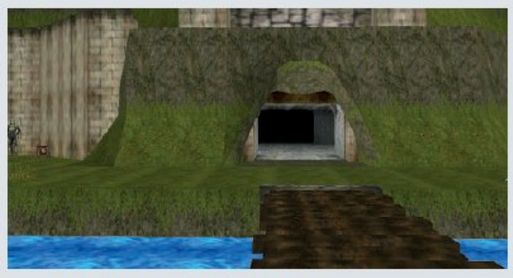
FAR LEFT: The program's flexible enough to allow for all sorts of unusual encounters.

LEFT: Normally enemies, these spirits have been repurposed into collectibles.

ROYALLY GOOD *Give these fan-made adventures a try*

DARK DESTINY
With the titular dark destiny hanging in the air and voices haunting his dreams, the protagonist sets off for Melenat.

HEIR OF GRANATYKI
A mysterious darkness sweeps the land in this engrossing and traditional *King's Field* prequel.



RETURN TO MELENAT
An interesting mix of the old with the new keeps this post-*King's Field 3* experience feeling fresh and exciting.

TRISMEGISTUS
This original adventure focuses on puzzles over combat, taking the game-making tool in a whole new direction.

and I kept having to toggle it on and off to successfully preview the map and game and use the map editor."

MOONSTRUCK

Eversole discovered that *Sword of Moonlight*'s framerate's would tank depending on how areas were connected. There was, of course, an arcane solution. "If Map 0 led to Map 1, and Map 1 led to Map 2, Map 2 would already be showing some major performance issues, and Map 3 from Map 2 would be completely unplayable, or would crash," he says. But if Map 2 and 3 were connected to Map 0 instead? No problem.

Many fan games made with *Sword of Moonlight*, like *Dark Destiny* and *Heir of Granatyki*, use the software to craft new adventures in old *King's Field* worlds, expanding on their locations and fragmented stories as prequels to key events in the often hazy timeline. Going through them, with their remarkable FMV introduction sequences, surprising twists, and obvious love for the series baked into every hidden room and deadly chest mimic, feels less like a walk in the past than a gift to the future. It is 2022, there are still new *King's Field* games out there waiting to be played, and they've been created by people who understand exactly what it is that makes the series so enthralling.

Even MasterTaffer's *Return to Melenat* – a game that visually echoes the originals so closely it starts you off in the same spot you do in 1995's *King's Field 2* (confusingly released in the US as *King's Field*, since the first game never left Japan) – sparks the imagination. It subtly rebuilds old areas to show them in a whole new light (and to trip up any seasoned hands who wrongly assume they already know how this is going to play out).

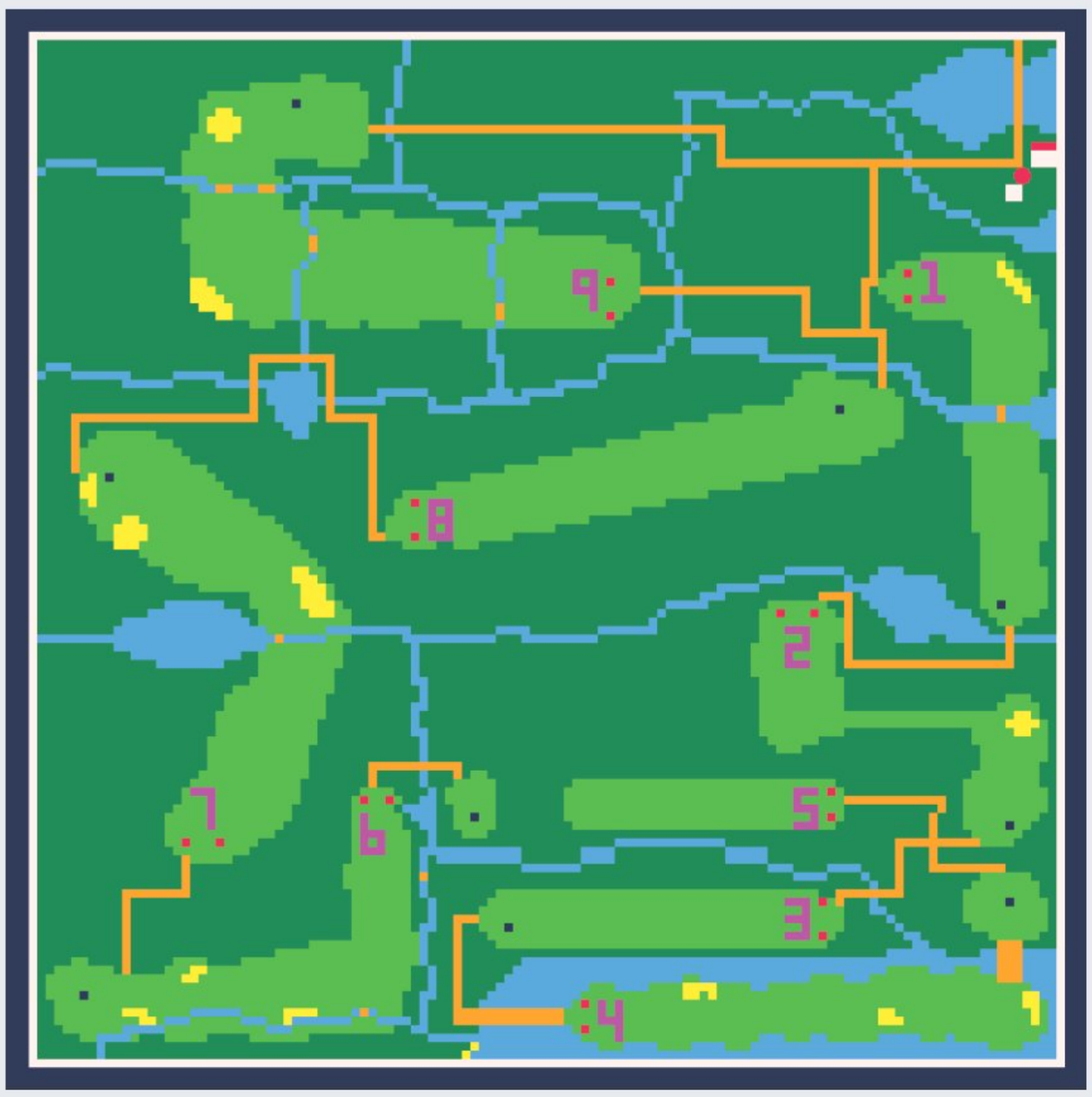
THE SOFTWARE APPROPRIATELY SEEMS TO HAVE JUST AS MANY QUIRKS

Trismegistus is something of an outlier, with more cerebral challenges and outright puzzles that draw from a very different well. "I am a fan of the *Myst* series as well, and decided to try to make a game like that using *Sword of Moonlight*," Eversole says, because he wanted to try "pushing the limits" of what it could do. The tonal shift still feels completely fitting, shining a spotlight on *King's Field*'s quiet mastery of environmental storytelling. Every broken pedestal and torch-lit corridor somehow gives the impression they're steeped in lore, and familiar *King's Field* architecture and enemy models being used in new ways enhances the unsettling feeling that the environment around you is a shattered version of itself.

Games built with *Sword of Moonlight* may look ancient and rudimentary next to *Elden Ring*, but there's a reason fans are still drawn to the engine all these years later. There's a real art to working with its limitations: the surrounding murk is meant to be enveloping as much as it is a trick to mask limited draw distances. The slow pace is a feature, not a bug. Even ankle-biting spiders must be treated with a healthy mix of fear and respect. These keepers of the old ways have given us the opportunity to once more wander through worlds gaming has left behind, with new, undiscovered places to explore before they too fade into legend. ■

Kerry Brunskill

A collection aside



A COLLECTION ASIDE

This month, MEGHANN O'NEILL got unreasonably obsessed with golf and plants. Luckily, vast adventures were to follow, in procedurally generated lands. It's great that some indie games focus on one thing, others are expansive, and many are a combination, depending on which elements of gameplay and aesthetics are under investigation. Scope is further confused when you realise a game only about golf is impossibly large, or that a game only about plants has a complex political backstory, or that your massive world is really just about the small and finite love between a band of ultimately forgettable people. We hope you find as much, or as little, as what you're looking for, within.

BRENDAN KEOGH'S PUTTING CHALLENGE

DEVELOPER Mellow Games **PRICE** $1-4.50 + DLC **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://brkeogh.itch.io/brendan-keoghs-putting-challenge

Golf. The only thing worse than golf are golf video games games, amirite? Party Golf was OK, only because it was excessively colourful and allowed you to play with banana-shaped balls. In a very "party"-averse fashion (although this can certainly be multiplayer), Brendan Keogh's Putting Challenge doubles down on golf's more tedious qualities and, somehow, I absolutely love it. I've played some golf. Mostly, I've done an inordinate amount of walking around, usually to go back to the shop to get more balls after losing balls in a lake, or on pixel art.

My husband told me he lost all his balls IRL, when he was playing golf in Orange with his mates. It's a game that elicits golf stories, for sure. The golf mechanics are as you'd expect them to be. Walk, or view, the hole first (because it will span multiple scenes). Choose whether to putt, chip or drive, press Z (and Z again) to power your hit. The ball will behave differently on each surface and find the hole eventually. Check your scores with E. There are no surprises here, which makes sense. Unless you forget to pick up your ball, then, you know, walk back for it.

What I am surprised about is the intense emotional reaction I had to exploration. Keogh told me he couldn't remember how many (sometimes procedurally generated) scenes are in the game. He estimated 20x30=600. I rented a bike and counted 30x44=1,320 scenes!! (Although I do think 44 might be wrong because I got confused by a river.) The immense and foreboding Shapeir desert in Quest for Glory 2 had 13x8=104 scenes, in which there were six special things to find. There's a whole bloody nine hole course in this desert that you can entirely miss!

If I have one criticism, it's that you should be required to fill up a canteen at water traps on each hole, or die from thirst... Just kidding. The fact that you can drown balls on the desert course is entirely tense enough, not to mention having to find each hole in the first place. Remember, in the early Ultimas, how you'd systematically traverse the thickest of forest, in the hopes of stumbling across a tiny treasure? It's like that.
I actually felt a bit teary when I found a beautiful garden (literally pink pixels on pastel green) in Keogh's seemingly endless desert.

The sanctuary, Erana's Peace, was the best thing about Quest for Glory, and nostalgic wandering will compel me forever. Brendan Keogh's Putting Challenge is also like the Stardew Valley of golf games, if Stardew Valley didn't have much to do except golf. Objectively, exploration just leads to more golf, achievements, and a little dialogue, but a game with 1,320 scenes was beyond my wildest dreams, as a kid, even if they are all filled with golf. I probably should mention, I found at least five courses (some look to be under construction), mini golf, and more.

I played with my family this afternoon, but they play like they play golf (mostly mini golf) IRL; they're having fun until they play a bad hole and then they immediately want to quit. I think I much prefer being the lonely guy playing by himself on Sandy Desert, then aimlessly wandering (over a good couple of hundred scenes) back to town, lamenting my poor aim and the deepness of the lake. Brendan Keogh's Putting Challenge engaged me in unexpected ways. And, don't worry. If you hate walking, like my kids, there's a golf cart DLC for $1.50.

Irving Harris
I'm looking for a plant that can supposedly help me hear better but I've forgotten what it's called.
I remember it's bright red though.
St John's Poppy
Storian
The flowers are red with a sweet scent.
Day 3
Hint
Bios
The Will to Explore
A Closer Inspection
A Rising Dread

Grayce Enwright
It would certainly come in helpful with my father-in-law tomorrow.
I guess I'll just have to settle for some Daisy Dock to help get me through it instead.
Day 13
Daisy Dock
Devil's Nightcap
Bluish purple flowers.
Bios
The Will to Explore
A Closer Inspection
A Rising Dread

STRANGE HORTICULTURE

DEVELOPER Bad Viking **PRICE** $21.50 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://www.iceberg-games.com/strange-horticulture/

I've been trying not to get burned out by work this year. As soon as my last student has been educated for the day, I play games. Thanks to Strange Horticulture, however, I've now taken on an additional role, moonlighting as an Olde English horticulturalist, curing maladies, investigating poisonings, identifying and watering plants, then tramping across the countryside to find what people want. It's a bit like the Papers, Please of plant games, right down to writing names and observations on labels. I don't want to poison anyone, myself. By accident, anyway.

The game takes place in a dark, but cosy, shop, over several days. Ring the bell to summon customers, listen to their story, then find what they need on your increasingly disorderly shelves. How do you know what they need? Open the drawer to find letters, labels and items, including a hefty reference book. If you need Dranthium, look for long, sharp leaves. Trimblehuff's flowers mostly point down. And so on. Making mistakes leads to a "rising dread" and, soon enough, your fragmented mind needs to be reassembled via various (slightly punitive) puzzles.

Finding new plants and pages for your book occurs as customers, colleagues, and mysterious strangers get in touch with leads, usually in the form of cryptic clues. The plant-finding business is competitive, I guess. A friend of a friend found mushrooms in a cave to the East of Arnside so, if you can find this location on the map, you'll travel there (which is told as a story via text). As I recently discovered in Bilkins' Folly, treasure hunting can be very engaging and suitably rewarding. In this case the reward is always plants, but it's still good.

I think the game is wonderful, and I played it to the bitter end, but I would mention a few criticisms. Decision making is certainly fun, like whether to intensify or cure a person's disturbing dreams, but I also wanted to be able to turn people away, or treat them ineffectually. This would complicate the game's logic significantly, but you're often forced back to linearity when any given puzzle remains unsolved for too long. This happens all the time in the adventure genre but, because agency underpins so much of Strange Horticulture, linear chokepoints feel dissonant.

There's also an incremental hint system, which I love, but it struggles to articulate the puzzles that rely on observation. Luckily, all of the art is thoughtful and beautiful, so you'll spend a lot of time staring at it. The puzzles also don't get much harder, over time, which is perhaps why this experience feels like a job. Yes, a person will (later) tell you they have stomach pains rather than the name of the specific mushroom they need for stomach pains, but you're still just finding a mushroom. Of course, like any great "detective game", it is possible to miss content entirely.

Ultimately, Strange Horticulture will punish you for (only) doing your job, if you fail to notice the larger political landscape and how to manipulate it. I joined a cult, then didn't have the nous to carry out their dirty work, so certain avenues were locked. I'd suggest allying with everyone, and not making any rash decisions, or causing any nasty rashes. The ending states are complex, clever, and combine good and evil, while relying on competent horticulturing. After all that, I definitely need a holiday and the sweet smell of a Worryless flower.

A collection aside

WILDERMYTH

DEVELOPER Worldwalker Games **PRICE** $35.95 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://wildermyth.com/

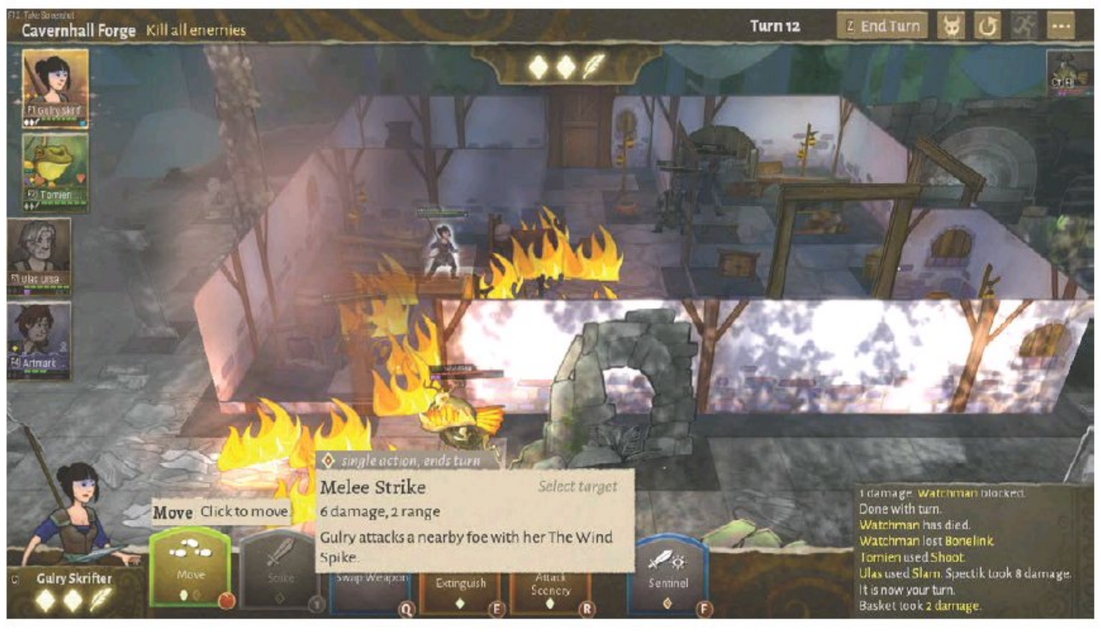
These characters are my best friends; they are lifelong companions, comrades, lovers and rivals. I've battled alongside their children, then watched as they all gradually turn grey, or to crystal (don't ask), and die. Yet, somehow, unlike your Dragon Age or Witcher, Wildermyth's story is procedurally generated. Every narrative thread feels coherent, so I went in search of process videos, to explain the vast detail with which character and plot development are structured. (It also has a bloody good turn-based strategy combat system, but I'll get to that later.)

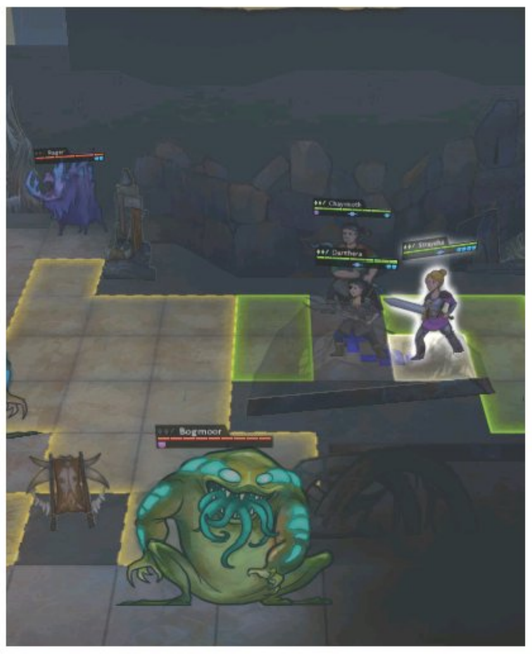
Stories are described as a "library of plays for a school drama program," by lead developer, Nate Austin, in a talk named, "Procgen in Wildermyth: Storytelling." The game chooses comic strips that work for the available actors (or characters), yet each will bring "their own flavour to presentation". Stories are selected via a complex weighting system, then any given character might "tweak their lines" based on trait, class, gender, lover, friends, or family. I had not imagined the intricacy of this logic while playing but it makes complete sense, now I'm aware of it.

And so, when Dagtara met a cute guy in a bar, of course she would follow him on his silly errand. Did it matter that she already had a lover? No. The lover simply initiated a whole sequence of incredulous dialogue and asked to come along as chaperone. Long story short, there were monsters, and the guy made a hasty exit. Eventually, a game lifetime later, when my company of heroes were reminiscing (in the scenario's evocative ending comic), the elderly lovers had a laugh about that time Dagtara got a crush on a coward. It was amazing.

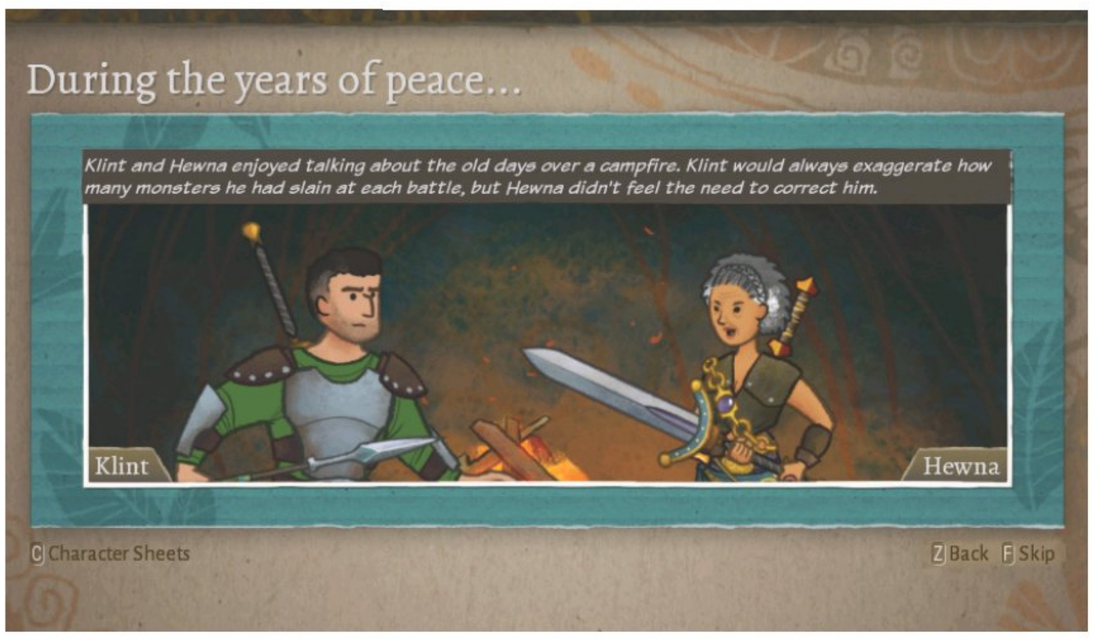
There is an overarching campaign in which the story is (roughly) fixed, so you'll mostly be fighting one of several factions, including the bone/metal Morthagi or alien Thrixl, and there will be established characters and quests. How this plays out, however, obviously depends on characters' emergent evolution as a result of the additional, random quests that are triggered by context. So, my journey through any "fixed" scenario would be quite different to yours. The campaign is highly replayable, in addition to content reserved for random scenarios, too.

There's an existential sadness to the wider narrative, but smaller increments are almost always cheerful and fun, which is a potent combination in terms of endearing player to characters. To add even more layers to emotional connection, you can choose





Train Rookie
by Douglas Austin
Wiki
In the years leading up to her retirement, Gulry began to share. Perhaps she saw it as the only way her experiences might remain precious. She passed on what lessons she could to her juniors, grudgingly, but not without good humor.
Who benefited most from Gulry's lessons?
C Character Sheets
Z Back
Choose:
Hewna
Tomdion
Maror
All who read her tale.
+3 Legacy Points


During the years of peace...
Klint and Hewna enjoyed talking about the old days over a campfire. Klint would always exaggerate how many monsters he had slain at each battle, but Hewna didn't feel the need to correct him.
Klint
Hewna
C Character Sheets
Z Back F Skip

characters' personality traits, like "bookish" or "snarky", at the start of a scenario or when recruiting. I loved one moment when Prim was recruiting and the newbie accurately made jokes about her past adventures, then apologised, laughed, and said he'd been put up to it by Prim's rival. A goofball, apparently.

And I have no idea which traits and conditions led to Numdric meeting a doppelganger and them both deciding to live (separately) as Numdric, but it was truly hilarious. In Wildermyth, as in life, I suppose, everyone will pass (even if shadows of certain companions will sometimes fight again, as legacy recruits). War is only ever won temporarily. Makes sense to joke about one's plight then, I guess. Even when a character dies, the others will comment with wry acceptance, showing they understand that their specialness relies on the intangibility of their creation.

Combat is also procedurally generated, although structured by context. My favourite battles are defending against incursions, when an army of ever-stronger adversaries marches into your territory, after a timer reaches zero. If you prepare defences on a tile, on the strategic map, you can then command a volley of arrows, barricades, townsfolk, and all of your heroes instead of the usual five, on a battle level. It's extremely fun to feel powerful and well prepared, although this is potentially not as challenging as most other battles (if strong heroes are close by).

Generally, you can attack a tile with a maximum of five heroes or complete a side quest with three, so you'll have to decide who is right for the job, from warriors, hunters and mystics. It's your classic melee, ranged, magic mix, but with gameplay doubling down on some unusual and meaningful features. For example, warriors can choose abilities that allow them to end a turn in a guard position, so that they will attack first, as soon as an enemy comes into range. When a hunter, or adjacent character is attacked, they can retaliate, which can be incredible for strategy.

I also like the flexibility that comes with your companions acting in any order, and that you're often allowed one smaller action for free, like opening a door. Most interestingly, mystics don't have mana or spells to cast. They "interfuse" with environmental objects and manipulate them in (mostly) offensive ways. So, if you're interfused with a tree, you might "splinterblast" an area. Interfusing with textiles will allow you to constrict an enemy, causing damage and a movement penalty. It's a cool take on magic, especially when combined with fire propagation.

Another battle mode I love is "escape". In Monarchs Under the Mountain, my party of five (tasked with reaching a far flung exit) were immediately surrounded by twenty-two enemies, with endless waves to come. I was overwhelmed several times, but it proved to be an awesome challenge. I even tried sacrificing the terrified daughter of my ageing warrior (frankly, because she was the least experienced) to a terrible, immortal fate, in the vain hope the cultists might be gentle on me, but they were not and then I had only four remaining to fight for me, which was so much worse.

Eventually, I settled on a party of three warriors, one to clear the way, two to guard behind, and two mystics in the middle, one to fling flammable objects, while the other set the entire damn level on fire. Needless to say, the warriors burned and the mystics were butchered, as they inched forward, a few tiles at a time, but the lead warrior reached the exit with one hit point to spare and I was able to salvage those who died a softer death, in various permanently debuffed states. And I got the Pyrrhic Victory achievement to boot. It was amazing.

One of the great intersections for story and combat is that when a companion falls, you can choose a permanent penalty, or to bolster your other companions, but they will always comment in some poignant way. If Prim is maimed and won't leave her tent for a while, someone caring will check on her, until she's back on her feet, likely slower but ever as deadly. As these unique friends fade from my memory, it's definitely better to have loved and lost than to have tried to live forever. In Wildermyth, all die.

And those who don't will inevitably regret it.

FINDING RELIGION

Via experimentation, continuous rage-quitting, and cheese.

Meghann O'Neill is concerned that her husband has been raising bee ownership in conversation a lot, recently. Could be sweet, or just painful.

I'm not sure I've ever been so determined to enjoy a video game. Over six weeks, I started (probably) 30 games of Civilization VI, and abandoned almost all before the atomic age. I loved it at release and there's lots of "new stuff", but I'm engaging inconsistently; opening strong, getting bored. This is not to say I haven't had fun, but it's been a stoic, oppressive kind of fun, like I imagine it would be to get a beehive, then have to actually learn how to take care of bees, wear rubber clothing, and read beekeeping blogs, honey notwithstanding.

Former PC Powerplay editor, David Wildgoose, once told me that he strategises a win as early as when he is choosing a leader. What? I've always played the Civ series with more of a wondrous, exploratory, "Wow, humanity is amazing," approach. Winning was incidental. Playing Settlers of Catan with my family, and beating them, even with the most unfair of starts, has reminded me that I actually do like to formulate a winning strategy, however. Civ VI is incredibly intricate, so maybe it's just taken some time to feel satisfied with any kind of "long game".

My favourite Civs are the outliers; those with such extreme qualities that they force (or invite) creative play. The Maori, for example, begin with the ability to move through the ocean, so on an archipelago world, you can settle ten cities while opponents are still stuck on their little islands. (Not to mention the early production boosts and culture bombs from fishing boats.) I got sick of Kupe surprisingly fast, however. I had so many cities, I just stopped caring about them when I couldn't imagine life among individual campus districts, I guess.

It also didn't help that I forgot to boost the difficulty, especially for Kupe. Civ is no fun on Prince. Conversely, Immortal and Deity just endlessly lead to the worst end-game FOMO. "Oh, so you've all got your fancy sea walls up before the ice caps melt, have you? How nice." There's only so much Forbidden Island I want in my Civ - And "losing" climate change is distressing. The harder difficulties did encourage me to scrutinise the UI, however. Did you know Lautaro (as neighbour) gets +10 to all of his military units when you are in a golden/ heroic age? I did not.

Mostly, I maintain an army for defence. Experimenting with offensive war is challenging, but sometimes very rewarding, once you learn the minutiae of units and fortifications. Thanks to unfolding real world events, I lost my taste for it. So, I started playing with another outlier, Mansa Musa. I was wary of the fact that mines generate more gold and less production, because building quickly is the whole game (isn't it?), but my treasury was constantly overflowing. I just purchased every building, from libraries to research labs, as soon as they were available.

In one game, on a small map, Eleanor of Aquitaine's religion squashed another, as early as the mediaeval period, then came for mine. I can appreciate the goodies provided by religion, when you have lots of followers, but I dislike having to remember to buy religious units. (Especially because I already had to keep lists of what to buy when playing as Mansa, who literally built nothing except districts, projects, and wonders.) Faith can seem like a waste of effort, unless you're committed. Clawing back my religion, however, taught me that religious combat is actually pretty great.

And so, thanks to my entire populace being rich and having the luxury of not having to work, with endless time for prayer, I created debaters, pilgrims, chaplains, and the incredible proselytiser and translator, over maybe three consecutive eras. They painstakingly spread my turtle religion to 50 percent of cities in every other civilisation. There was some light combat, and I discovered how to use gurus. Amazingly, I planned all of this from near to the start of the game. What's next? Saving land for a National Park approximately 10 hrs of play before I can build it?

Civilization VI is wonderful and infuriating. I'm going to have to stop playing for a bit, though, because I need to review several more games for A Collection Aside. Interestingly, although I loved carefully implementing my religious Mansa victory, I enjoyed the game even more after I'd won and the pressure was off. Sandbox Civ, if you will. I definitely need to learn more about rock bands and secret societies. And have you seen what they've done to the science victory? I finally feel like I have the early game covered. The end game is next.

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Nightingale

LORDS OF THE REALM

History, fantasy, and fashion meet in co-op survival game **NIGHTINGALE**

By Chris Livingston

In the late 1800s, towering metal pylons loom over the Victorian city of Nightingale, crackling with magical energy. In this alt-history timeline, ancient mystical creatures from another realm known as the Fae revealed themselves to the world in the 1500s, changing the course of human history by introducing us to magic. Nightingale essentially became the new centre of the world as people flocked to the city to learn the ways of arcane sorcery and put it to use in science and industry. Magic portals were opened and human explorers, known as Realmwalkers, began stepping through them to explore unknown worlds, returning with new resources, discoveries, and a whole lot of treasure.

But in 1889 this bold new age of magic came crashing to an end. A mysterious cataclysm called the Pale invaded our world. To flee its destruction, humans across the planet attempted to use their portals to reach the relative safety of Nightingale, but the portal network had already been destroyed. Instead of arriving at Nightingale, these humans stepped out of their portals and found themselves trapped in the Fae realms with no way to return home, armed with nothing but their wits and resourcefulness in a strange and hostile world.

That's a lot to absorb before you've fashioned your first axe and chopped down your first tree in *Nightingale*, the upcoming shared-world survival game from Inflexion Games. But there's another, less complicated way to explain it.

"It's all about top hats," says Aaryn Flynn, ex-BioWare general manager and CEO of Inflexion Games tells me. "There's a lot of top hats."

FASHION AND FUNCTION

The Victorian style is certainly potent in the concept art, screenshots, and footage I'm shown when I meet with members of the development team via Zoom. Yes, you'll kill an angry boar and strip its hide with a knife like in any other number of survival games, but you won't wind up dressed in crude leather rags and a loincloth in *Nightingale*. Our Realmwalkers may be stranded in a savage world of monsters and magic, but that's no excuse for not dressing up all fancy. You'll take your collected resources to an old-fashioned sewing machine and create dapper waistcoats, bowler hats and bustle gowns. Classy duds. The basics of survival are familiar: trees need to be chopped for wood and berries picked for sustenance. But this is a particularly stylish gaslamp fantasy.

VICTORIAN VS VIKING

How does* Nightingale *stack up against 2021's most popular survival game?

	VALHEIM	NIGHTINGALE
PORTALS	✓	✓
CO-OP PLAY	✓	✓
SWAMP MONSTERS	✓	✓
BOWLER HATS	✗	✓

While a lot of details are still under wraps, and many features still in the works or not fully fleshed out yet, we know *Nightingale* plans to support up to ten co-op players in a single game when it launches into Early Access near the end of 2022. No PvP is planned for *Nightingale* – this is a strictly co-operative affair more along the lines of *Valheim*, where you work together with friends, than something like *Rust* where you spend your time murdering strangers. You can also play solo, though from the looks of the boss monsters I'm shown, which Inflexion calls "apex creatures", bringing along a couple pals for the battle sure seems like a good idea.

BOSS LEVEL

One apex, called Ishmael, is a massive leathery swamp beast capable of turning ranged combat into a melee affair by crossing the distance with a single leap. The Fae has a race of giants as well, towering humanoids with great shaggy beards and feet big enough to flatten a building. I'm shown the concept art of a third apex creature, a massive bronze being with four arms and a clockwork head that looks like it could serve as a god to a race of copper robots, which I'm told is called an automaton.

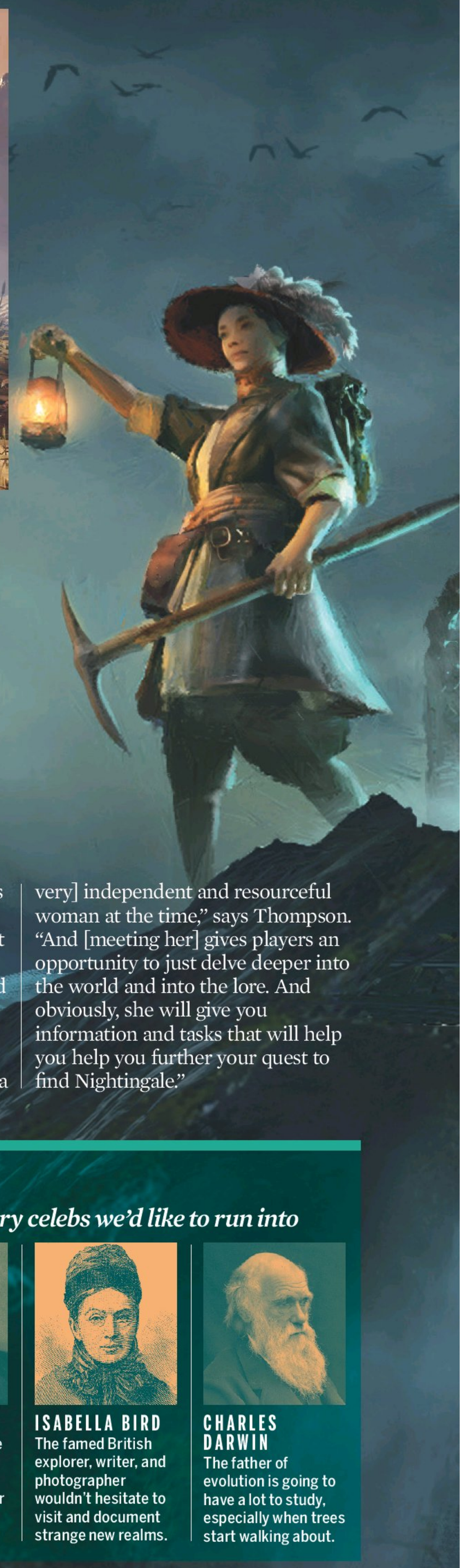
"We have this concept within the Fae mythology," says Neil Thompson, art and audio director for *Nightingale*. "They're not strictly machines, because the Fae would never do something as crass as [build] something that requires gears and fuel, but they have these magically infused, we call them automatons, which were built millennia ago but still exist. And the bloodlines that build them have long since passed into obscurity but the automatons themselves still exist within some of the realms. So, you know, what is their motivation? And what are their particular abilities? Well, that's something for players to find out."

But not all encounters with the creatures of these realms need to end in violence. There may be peaceful solutions that can be explored instead of simply solving every problem you come across by unleashing a Victorian shotgun blast. The *Nightingale* trailer revealed at the Game Awards in December 2021 shows a massive giant angrily stomping on stone structures while a player backpedals and fires a bolt-action rifle at it. But another clip

Someone picked the wrong tree to chop down.

NO PVP IS PLANNED FOR NIGHTINGALE – THIS IS A STRICTLY CO-OPERATIVE AFFAIR

One of *Nightingale*'s apex creatures, swamp boss Ishmael.



"AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, WE WANT TO OFFER MULTIPLE WAYS TO SOLVE ONE OF THESE ENCOUNTERS"

shows the giant bending down to reach out in a friendly manner to the players. That reflects the more diplomatic solutions that will be available in the final game.

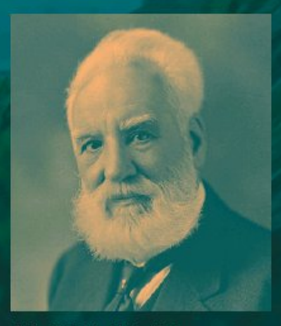
"As much as possible, we want to offer multiple ways to solve one of these encounters, right?" says Flynn. "So in the quest you might choose to take, the quest might say, 'Bring me back [something from] the giant,' and perhaps you could trade with the giant for it, or perhaps you would try to kill the giant and take it. Again, we want both options available for players so that they can choose how they want to go do it. And there might even be long term consequences to each of those choices in terms of how an NPC might ultimately act with you."

HISTORY CHANNELS

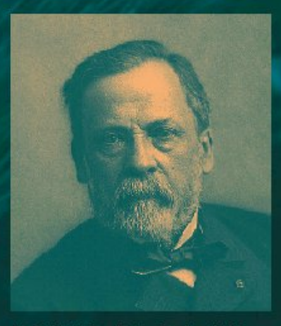
Beyond the fantastical, there are some NPCs in *Nightingale* you might recognise from our own history books. Nellie Bly, for example, was an American journalist in the late 1800s who, among other accomplishments travelled around the world in 72 days by steamship and railroad, setting a world record. (During which she met Jules Verne, who wrote Around the World in 80 Days, the fictional record Bly set out to beat.) A fictionalised version of Bly is woven into the lore of *Nightingale*. "Nellie Bly was an interesting character in that period, [a very] independent and resourceful woman at the time," says Thompson. "And [meeting her] gives players an opportunity to just delve deeper into the world and into the lore. And obviously, she will give you information and tasks that will help you help you further your quest to find Nightingale."

STAR POWER

A wishlist of other 19th century celebs we'd like to run into



ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL
The guy who invented the telephone would be interested in talking through portals.



LOUIS PASTEUR
The other realms are probably crawling with strange diseases. Who better to develop vaccines for Realmwalkers?

ISABELLA BIRD
The famed British explorer, writer, and photographer wouldn't hesitate to visit and document strange new realms.

CHARLES DARWIN
The father of evolution is going to have a lot to study, especially when trees start walking about.

That's just one of several historical figures inhabiting the Victorian world of *Nightingale*. Chemist and physicist Marie Curie is in the game, too, a scientist naturally drawn to study magic in the world of *Nightingale*. And according to Thompson, there are "plenty of others".

"We lean into that. We like it a lot, bringing in these potentially recognisable characters into the lore," adds Flynn. "Things like that, famous 19th century personalities who players are going to get a chance to interact with."

Some NPCs will serve even more of a purpose than historical flavour and quest-giving. While this feature won't be available immediately upon *Nightingale*'s release in Early Access, but is planned for later on in the game's development, eventually some NPCs will be recruitable and can help you build and service the structures you build.

"You don't have to necessarily do all the work yourself," says Flynn. "You can come across these other NPCs who are lost in the same situation you are, perhaps some of them have been in the realms for a long time. And you can connect with them, then you can bring them to your estate and you can have them do things for you. They also can join you on adventures so you can bring them along to help you hunt, help you defend yourself, etc."

Just try not to think of these NPCs as simple hired hands or soulless robots who will complete a list of chores. They sound more like companions in an RPG, which isn't surprising considering Inflexion was founded by Flynn, the former general manager at BioWare, and *Nightingale*'s 100-member team includes other BioWare veterans.

"I think an important thing to talk about, that we as a studio think of a lot is, to bring that sense of kind of balance to the world, the NPCs aren't just people you hire," says Leah Summers, director of production. "What are their desires? How do you need to take care of their needs or satisfy them so that we're not just kind of hiring out a bunch of people to do mundane chores. There's really choices and interesting consequences to what you're doing with the NPCs."

PORTAL WARS

The ultimate goal for players is to find a way to open a portal back to the city of Nightingale, but many other portals will need to be opened first (Nightingale itself, as a location, won't be present in the game when it enters Early Access). Within the Fae realm, players will be able to open magic doorways to new areas and discover zones that harbour new resources. I'm shown a desert-like biome at the edge of an ocean, where, intriguingly, a wrecked ship lies off the coast, framed by the setting sun. ("The real question is, is it a human ship?" says Thompson. "Or is it a Fae ship?") Players can also expect to open gateways to tropical jungles, murky swamps, dense forests, and whatever bizarre dimension that giant bronze clockwork god resides in.

Naturally, base-building is a big part of the experience, but to match

Nightingale

Fearsome, but I don't think he's mastered the wheel yet.

"AS YOU DO NEGATIVE THINGS, AS NEGATIVE THINGS HAPPEN TO YOU, HOPE GOES DOWN"

» your fancy clothing they're called estates, not bases. You don't have to clear out a spot of land and build your estate from scratch, either. Long before the cataclysm that stranded you here, other explorers were visiting this realm. You might come across an earlier Realmwalker's camp and be able to sleep in their bedroll. There are existing structures out in the world, places others have built that you can co-opt and build your estate alongside. You may even open a portal to a different realm, discover a new biome and decide that despite its harsh nature you want to build a

BOUND FOR CONFLICT

Meet just one of the dangerous enemies you'll encounter in the Fae realms

1 RIPPED AND TORN
These humanoid enemies are known as Bound Bruisers, and it's pretty easy to see why.

2 HATS RIGHT
The Bruiser's face is covered with different headgear, including wagon wheels, skulls, and copper tanks.

3 WEAPONS FREE
Some wield mighty bludgeons, others make do with just their fists. Either way: don't get hit.

second base there to more easily exploit its resources.

HOPE FLOATS

While you'll contend with some familiar survival systems in *Nightingale*, like keeping your health up and protecting yourself from heat or cold in different environments, there's a another meter players will contend with built on an entirely different notion than physical survival. It's hope.

"All Realmwalkers carry an amount of hope with them," says Flynn. "And it's a bar on your UI. As you do positive things, hope goes up. As you do negative things, as negative things happen to you, hope goes down. And so you have to manage that hope through the dangerous parts of the realms as you go adventuring. And you'll want to look to things to increase your overall pool of hope over time, you get stronger, you get more resilient and there'll be things that come at you that will shatter your hope and make you feel lost and alone forever."

Another survival game, *Frostpunk*, also had a hope meter (along with a discontent meter) that reflected the mood of your citizens in the post-apocalyptic city builder, but here in *Nightingale* it's focused on the individual player. I can see the hope meter in one of the clips I'm shown, as a player visits the realm in the early game, chopping trees and gathering resources. The bar is barely filled. In another clip it's entirely empty: the character is hopeless and has to find shelter to recharge.

"So the survival bars are traditionally grounded in the physical: health, hunger, etc," says Flynn. "And now we want to bring in a one that speaks more to a psychological element.

"A fun question developers ask themselves is, what's the power of hope? And so what if you did things that just absolutely swelled your hope beyond belief? What could you do in that mindset? What could you achieve?"

What indeed? ■

Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed

ABOVE: The ghost can spawn minions to discombobulate Ghostbusters.

RIGHT: Finding a ghost with a PKE Meter is less science, more pseudoscience.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2022	Illfonic	In-house	ghostbusterssu.com

GHOSTBUSTERS: SPIRITS UNLEASHED

A slimy but surprisingly clever take on 4v1 multiplayer

I'm no ghost scientist, but there are a few things I'm confident ghosts do: spin office chairs as a gag, fry electronics at the worst times, and make soda machines eject cans like fizzy ballistic missiles. I was able to do all three in *Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed*, so at the very least it passes my amateur ghostology test with slimy colours.

Ghostbusters is Illfonic's third licensed, 4v1 multiplayer game after *Friday the 13th* and *Predator: Hunting Grounds*. While the first two have come and gone while *Dead by Daylight* keeps on trucking and *Left 4 Dead 2* settles into old age, I don't think *Ghostbusters* is really trying to supplant either. This time Illfonic's really doing its own thing, making an asymmetrical game where one team never gets torn limb from limb.

Illfonic told me that one of the most common bits of feedback from players is how it's not fun to get taken out early in a match, so they modelled *Ghostbusters* after the scene in the first film where the 'busters chase Slimer through the hotel (and blast housekeeping carts and chandeliers along the way). Slimer's just causing mayhem, so in the game the ghost's objective is to scare hapless NPCs while the Ghostbusters try to catch them.

As a ghost I couldn't kill the Ghostbusters, but I could use abilities to slime them, mess with their proton packs, or briefly scare them into an incapacitated state. I haunted objects to spook NPCs while trying to manage my ectoplasm meter. I could chill out in a vending machine or a statue to regenerate, but staying there too long meant I was risking a Ghostbuster coming with their PKE meter raised to sniff me out.

The ghost is slippery, but if a couple Ghostbusters team up you can quickly be pulled into a trap and caught. But dying once as the ghost isn't the end. You have three 'rifts' hidden around the map to respawn from. There's a clever cat and mouse twist here, in that the Ghostbusters can find and destroy your rifts, too. The ghost can move their rifts, while the 'busters have to split their attention between hunting the ghost and calming down anxious NPCs.

AS A GHOST I COULDN'T KILL THE GHOSTBUSTERS, BUT I COULD SLIME THEM

THAT'S THE SPIRIT

Playing first-person as a Ghostbuster, the proton beam has the physicality it does in the movies, writhing like an angry energy snake. Elsewhere there's still fine-tuning to be done. I had to use the mouse wheel to shorten or lengthen the beam to position a ghost over a trap, but I kept swiping the wheel before fully ensnaring a ghost and swapping to my PKE meter instead. As the ghost I had trouble spotting objects I could inhabit: I wouldn't have minded ghost-o-vision highlighting every interactable.

PLAYED IT

There's too much button mashing to evade a trap or shake off a ghost's slime: those could have more interesting mechanics. *Spirits Unleashed* feels a bit generic in some of these finer details, but Illfonic still has ample time to work on it.

The developer promises a range of ghosts, along with a progression system that lets you unlock both cosmetics and equipment for the Ghostbusters and alternate abilities for the ghosts. There's also a story to follow, delivered by original actors Dan Aykroyd and Ernie Hudson. It's hard to judge how much staying power *Spirits Unleashed* will have, but it feels like it could become a recurring weeknight Discord pick: the lighter, less intense game you pile into when you need a break from your main squeeze. It's a pleasant surprise that a new Ghostbusters game in 2022 is a smart use of the licence, not just a nostalgic cash-in.

Wes Fenlon

PREVIEW

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 9, 2022	Two Point Studios	Sega	twopointcampus.com

TWO POINT CAMPUS

Two Point Hospital's follow-up takes us back to school

Education is the foundation of our society. Students are expected to get great marks through primary, secondary, and for some, higher education too. As a student I diligently concentrated on my grades... sometimes. But as an institutional boss in *Two Point Campus*, I was more concerned with placing the staff room dart board.

Two Point Campus puts you in the shoes of a school administrator looking to build the best educational environment possible for the students of Two Point County. You'll have to cater to their wants and needs, from library desks to food vendors. Balancing work and play for both teachers and students is of the utmost importance. And although you may get yourself into debt, see some students drop out, and struggle to keep your staff energised, it's still a lot of fun.

I started my journey in Freshleigh Meadows, a small town college where "life moves slowly and expectations are... lowly". This is the perfect place to start your career as a campus administrator. You're trying your best and that's all that matters. As long as you give these students the basics and a dollop of goodwill, they're happy to take a chance on your budding career.

TWO THE POINT

First thing's first, you need a course to teach. There isn't much point in having a college without something to learn, is there? The courses of *Two Point Campus* aren't exactly conventional either. Scientography, as you may have guessed it from the name, is science in an unusual format. It's not the usual sitting around with Bunsen burners and litmus tests – rather your students crowd around a gargantuan flask-shaped machine with far too many buttons and have a go pressing them. A giant hammer whacks away at the flask while multicoloured steam (or is that smoke?) plumes from its spout. That's the science I wish I took at school.

When I asked Ben Huskins, the design director at Two Point Studios, and senior producer Jo Koehler about creating these courses and their interpretations, they reference the absurd medical conditions Two Point's last game, *Two Point Hospital*, tackled, like Denim Jean or Shock Horror. Huskins says, "Obviously with *Two Point Hospital* it's all slightly, well completely bonkers. And so we asked, what's the equivalent of that? As we started making *Campus* it felt like the courses were the obvious place to give us that scope for having some courses that feel more grounded in reality, like Scientography.

PLAYED IT

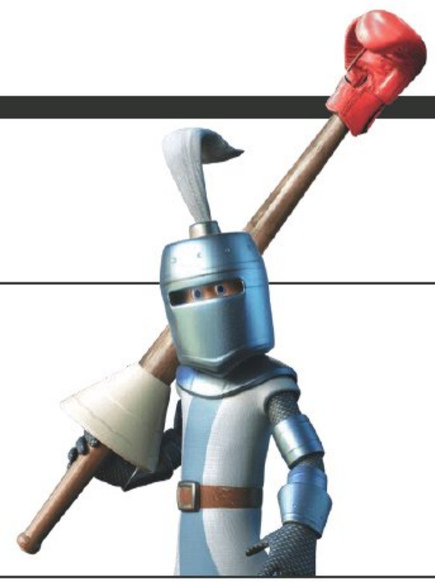
The reason we put that at the start of the game was that everyone recognises science and thinks about having science classes at school, but let's put a bit of twist on it. And then as the game progresses we gradually get introduced to the even more weird and wonderful courses."

I only managed to get a sneak peak at Scientography and Gastronomy, but I was assured by the team that the studies of students continue to get more wacky, such as Knight School, where your scholars will learn to joust.

For now, though, Scientography is my focus. I was quickly put to work designing a room with all the necessary equipment. A board for calculations and the aforementioned flask machine. But that's not all a college needs, is it? I need a dormitory for students to get their beauty sleep in, a bathroom and shower for hygiene and, of course, snacks to keep their energy up. Freshleigh Meadows is already looking pretty swish and I'm on a roll. Bins, plants, lockers, oh and let's give the students a library too. In their downtime the population should also have a place to socialise so a student lounge is a

I WAS QUICKLY PUT TO WORK DESIGNING A ROOM WITH ALL THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT

Two Point Campus



must, complete with dart board and perhaps a pinball machine if I'm feeling generous. Yes, that'll do nicely. Class grades are rising, as is the mood, and that's a success in my eyes. Just don't look at my bank account.

My campus is hustling and bustling. It's gone from sleepy to full on curriculum chaos. Koehler talks about some of the animations that go into making the game feel like this, saying that the team were given very little direction, and just understood the concepts right away. She says, "They're so fun, there are so many tiny little animations that if you just look at what's happening in front of you in play, everything is really spot on."

Amusingly, when I asked the team about the first level's setting, it turns out Freshleigh Meadows was based on a real place. Huskins and Koehler revealed that the location was based on an artist's home town from when he grew up. Huskins laughs, "In fact we had a meeting and we went on Google Street View to where he grew up and then we were like, 'Hang on a sec, there's the canal.'"

MERRY OLD ENGLAND

That classic Britishness flows through *Two Point Campus*. It had been a long time since I'd heard someone say "bully for you" before this hands-on, for one. Although there are masses of Americanisms in aesthetics, from lockers to sports flags, deep down *Two Point Campus* is hilariously British.

Huskins says, "The game is inevitably going to have that British twist on it just because of who we are and the sorts of things that we do. I mean *Two Point Campus* itself is meant to be a bit of a mix of lots of different DNA. As you progress through the game you get to go to different locations. And so although you start off with this very quintessential British rural area you jump around the map of new and old locations established by *Hospital*. And not all of them have that British feel to them, but you've still got the radio and the announcer."

As I'm toiling away on my campus, assiduously placing posters of fictional pop-stars and frowning at smelly students yet to take a shower, the radio and Tannoy system in the game are throwing out jokes and jibes. Contact lenses lost in lasagnas, mystery radio plays about world class detectives, and tannoy reminders reminding students to set reminders are all on the menu. I chuckled along in between the jovial tunes and snappy clips and clops of placing and moving my newly purchased furniture.

The team at Two Point had already thought about their next game as they worked on *Hospital*, and a school management sim felt right as the next step. "We have loads of different ideas for potential *Two Point* games now", Huskins says. "I remember while we were making *Two Point Hospital*, we had a list on a whiteboard. But we latched onto that education setting partly because it felt like a great opportunity to get to know some of these characters better. Students are going to spend that bit longer with you than a patient within a hospital.

"We also felt like it was a cool setting from the point of view of, everyone's got some experience of education. Even if they didn't go to college or university, everyone's got those memories from their eccentric teacher or that classmate that used to eat crayons."

"It's relatable, isn't it?", Koehler adds. And I couldn't agree more.

SCHOOL DAZE

Playing just a little bit of *Two Point Campus* did make me think back to my school and university experience. Even though a sim is very different to attending classes and studying, I did want to provide a great college experience to these students. Oh and nothing was more relatable than finding myself in some debt I was struggling to pay off, am I right student loan companies?

Plainly, from what I experienced, *Two Point Campus* is shaping up to be a tightly knit bundle of fun. As someone unfamiliar with the systems of *Two Point Hospital*, for example, the mechanics were clear and I could instantly see myself losing so much time managing these little campuses. The pride I felt when a room came out the way I wanted it to was splendid. And the jigsaw-like fitting of elements together was impressive. When I asked myself if I could fit a plant in the corner, a drinking fountain on the wall, or a bench by a tree, the answer was yes. That satisfaction of seeing your vision for a room come to life and seeing these little people use it as intended was just swell.

Imogen Mellor

THE GAME IS INEVITABLY GOING TO HAVE THAT BRITISH TWIST ON IT

You'd think culinary students could make their own food and drinks.

Two Point Campus

ABOVE: You see, the food is comically oversized. A classic comedy formula.

LEFT: Yeah, that's exactly what nights out at my university looked like.

Star Trek: Resurgence

ABOVE: A warp engine experiment gone awry is causing chaos.

RIGHT: How has Starfleet *still* not figured out seatbelts?

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Dramatic Labs

PUBLISHER
Epic Games

LINK
startrek-resurgence.com

STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

The diplomatic heart of '90s Trek finally makes a comeback

Halfway through Discovery's first season, I accepted that it wasn't my kind of Star Trek. The modern series' grim war felt tonally off for a series that's always been about exploration and humanity, and when it *did* spend time on its crew, the melodrama dial was stuck at 11. Good or bad, it wasn't my Trek.

I had the opposite experience when I played a new demo of *Star Trek: Resurgence*, a story-focused adventure from former Telltale developers at new studio Dramatic Labs. Within five minutes, *Resurgence*'s captain was lamenting a catastrophic warp core malfunction and dropping technobabble like "10,000 teradynes per second" while he stared out a viewport. Twenty minutes later and the senior officers were sitting across a table from Ambassador Spock, talking about their mission to negotiate peace between two alien races. Diplomacy was the obvious answer, but what type of diplomacy? A polite debate ensued. Good or bad, this is definitely my kind of Star Trek.

Resurgence gives off big TNG vibes, and not just because it's set a couple years after Nemesis, the final TNG film. A Telltale-style adventure seems like a perfect mould for Star Trek: the best episodes of the TV shows are about characters solving problems together, grappling with their own weaknesses, or solving some quirky sci-fi mystery. Character drama, lots of dialogue, puzzle solving – yep, that's an adventure game.

A TELLTALE-STYLE ADVENTURE SEEMS LIKE A PERFECT MOULD FOR STAR TREK

The demo was just 30 minutes, which covered introductions to the main cast and not much more. I swapped between the perspectives of incoming first officer Jara and young engineer Carter Diaz, with subtle dialogue options that let you nudge their personalities rather than going full Paragon or Renegade. If you appreciated the range of emotions Jean-Luc Picard could express with a frown, you'll also vibe with how much *Resurgence* is focused on capturing the nuances of Star Trek chat.

ALL TALK

The developers told me that the full game will have some actiony bits too, but in the demo I didn't do much more than walk a few feet. I hope there's more opportunity to explore the ship in the full game, which sounds like it'll be equivalent to a full Telltale season, which the dev equated to a Trek miniseries in length.

Though *Resurgence*'s tone is exactly what I want out of Star Trek, I'm worried the developer isn't going to have quite the time or budget it deserves here. Dramatic Labs is using Unreal Engine and opted for a realistic art style that stumbles into the uncanny valley. The facial animations aren't bad, but have a robotic quality you don't see in today's luxuriously motion captured games – they remind me of the first couple *Mass Effect*s, now well-over a decade old.

PLAYED IT

Likewise, the walking animations have an awkwardness to them that feels mismatched with the fidelity *Resurgence* is shooting for. These flaws stand out more in a realistic game than in the comic book style Telltale used for so many years.

Resurgence isn't finished, of course, and there's time left to smooth out the most noticeable flaws. But the developers said the animation is close to where they want it to be, so I'm not expecting a dramatic transformation between now and release later this year. I can look past some goofy moments if the rest of *Resurgence* is as promising as it seems, though – even The Next Generation open palm slammed the silliness button every few episodes. TV Star Trek may no longer feel like the '90s Trek I loved, but *Resurgence* is doing its best to warp headfirst into that void.

Wes Fenlon

The voice actor does an uncanny Spock – I bet even Nimoy would've been fooled.

Sniper Elite 5

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 26, 2022

DEVELOPER
Rebellion Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
sniperelitegames.com

SNIPER ELITE 5

Bringing history to life, and then making it very dead

Lieutenant Karl Fairburne is nothing if not a professional. A deep grizzled voice that would make any 1940s woman swoon, short back and sides haircut, and far too many pockets – you can tell he's a man on a world-changing mission. Even if he has just accidentally fired his pistol into the ground, alerting several nearby Nazis to his position.

I swear at myself in frustration while launching over a countryside fence and running into a patch of long grass to evade my pursuers. Crouching down, I steady my breath as the guards anxiously amble over. That was a very stupid move… but I can't help but laugh.

Sniper Elite 5 is the latest game in the World War II shooter series from Rebellion. Although solidly set in the serious events surrounding the conflict, with your American James Bond-esque infiltrator Karl on vital missions for the Allies, there's plenty of goofy fun to be had while popping Nazis. Gaining crucial information to support the war effort is the aim of the game, but aiming at fascist crotches and shooting their nads off is certainly a perk of the job.

The form and function of *Sniper Elite 5* do feel a little at odds, but that's really the pleasure of the series for anyone but the most hardcore military history buff. Though very po-faced in form, the function is to make you laugh and feel ultimately satisfied by pulling off your most ridiculous plans. The game wears a frowning Greek tragedy mask, but the performer underneath is giggling along with you, enjoying its time gallivanting around the stage. You're encouraged to play however you want. And how I like playing *Sniper Elite* is by going with the flow, no matter how silly that flow gets.

What's made the *Sniper Elite* series stand out over the years, in a sea of World War II based shooters from *Call of Duty* to *Medal of Honor*, is that when you pull off shots and kills, you're rewarded with a slow-motion, hyper-realistic shot of your bullet entering, damaging, and killing your opponent, with glorious X-ray so you can see every detail. While as a sniper you spend most of the time shooting at heads, you can also kill with shots to other parts of the body… like the crown jewels. The drama this invests in even the most wince-inducing shots is a treat.

It's a little crass, and even gross, but mostly it's very funny. Even when hard-ass Lieutenant Fairburne is taking his job very seriously, there's a flair and sense of humour to be found in every scenario. To be that stoic and focused, and then to canonically shoot your enemy in the groin just has a certain comic je ne sais quoi.

And you get ample points for defeating your enemies in any way you can find, so balls to the wall is practically encouraged.

PLAYED IT

GUNNING FOR SUCCESS

My hands-on preview certainly gives me plenty of opportunities to embrace both the serious and the silly. The setting of the mission at hand sees Lieutenant Fairburne hot on the tail of a Nazi plan. Something called Project Kraken is rumoured to be the Nazis' next big move, and I need to find and prevent whatever atrocities the rotters are cooking up in their war crime kitchen. To do so, I need to infiltrate a French chateau, heavily guarded by soldiers, at posts and on patrol with keen eyes and ears at the ready. Karl's foiled Nazi plans before and they cannot risk it happening again.

My journey starts with whispering amongst French rebels with rifles and perfectly rolled cigarettes in hand. They've heard murmurs of this potential plan but need to know exact details. The Nazi in charge has already moved on from this site, but has hopefully left ample documents behind to inform my next

SOMETHING CALLED PROJECT KRAKEN IS RUMOURED TO BE THE NAZIS' NEXT BIG MOVE

Charlie Chaplin off out to do some shopping.

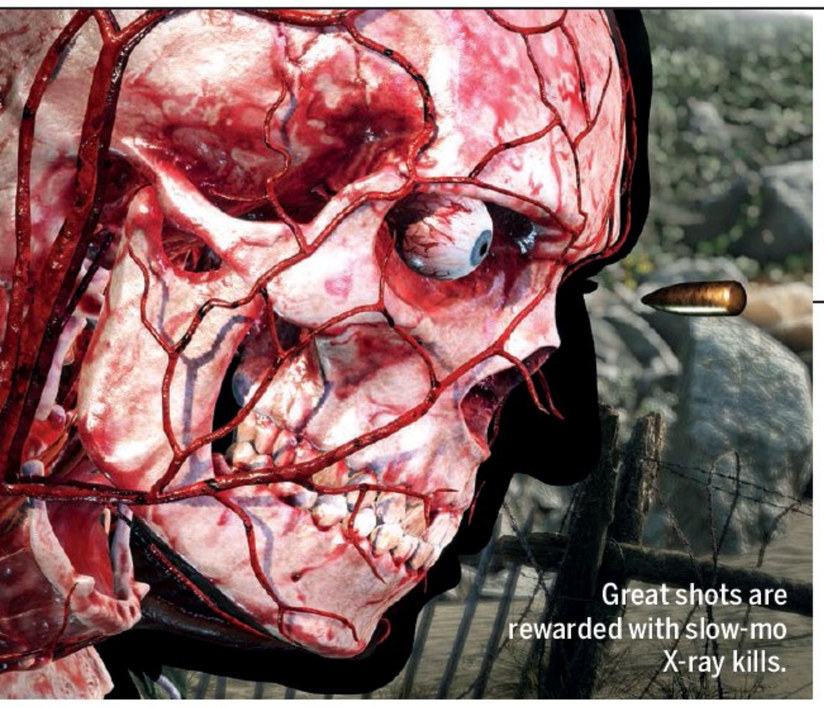
ABOVE: Lieutenant Karl Fairburne is more machine than man.

LEFT: Elbow pads aren't just for geography teachers.

Sniper Elite 5

RIGHT: That's how you travel in style.

BELOW: Something tells me this guard post isn't going to be guarded much longer.



Great shots are rewarded with slow-mo X-ray kills.

move. And hey, even if this whole infiltration business is a bust, at least I'll get to do a little murder on the side, right? So off I go, Nazi hunting.

Immediately as I start sneaking towards the chateau, *Sniper Elite 5* feels like an upgrade over *Sniper Elite 4*. The visuals, the sound, the AI of the enemies – it's all sharper, more realistic, and more satisfying. Where *Sniper Elite 4* enemies would just mill about in the last place they saw you, *Sniper Elite 5*'s AI assumes I'm still in the area and continues its pursuit just that little bit further. If I hideously cock up my plans, I really have to wait for a chance to try it all again, or just completely reevaluate. When attempting a breach of the chateau, for example, I die several times attempting one approach before calling it quits because loud or quiet, the patrols and placements of the guards are woven tightly enough to foil my plans.

Though not a puzzle game in the traditional point-and-click sense, *Sniper Elite 5* is already setting me brain teasers. Risk discovery for a quieter way into a secret room, or blow the bloody doors off? Kill the guard on higher ground, eliminating the potential for him to spot me, or risk the closer target out of ease? Go through the main doors of a complex or slink my way to tunnels which will be harder to access if I'm found out once inside? They're tricky tactical choices.

WHO YOU GONNA KARL?

You can save scum (I certainly recommend manually saving your game frequently) if you're keen to explore every option presented to you. Rebellion has no problem with fans changing their minds all the time, that's apparent – it just wants to maximise fun. But these options make the levels, even just the one I get to try, highly replayable. You'll want to give each area another shot (pun intended) to discover what you might have missed. Or maybe try for some of those subtler kill opportunities that you only noticed after you'd already downed everyone with bollock shots.

You can go very subtle indeed, in fact, because *Sniper Elite 5* features *Hitman*-esque 'accidents' you can use to take enemies out non-lethally. However, if I'm being candid, I'm not exactly sure of the advantage. The resulting kill cams are less bombastic, and it's not really like I feel too bad about killing a dozen Nazis here and there on my way to find an A4 sheet of paper anyway. At the end of the level there is a chart to show you how loud or quiet you were, as well as lethal or non-lethal. I'm sure there will eventually be challenge runs the community constructs around the idea of these post-release, but like the niche 2011 horror film Silent but Deadly I aimed to be umm... silent but deadly.

But being stealthy doesn't mean there isn't a little room for fun. Taking a level on outpost by outpost means that you can go a bit gung ho on occasion. Sniper rifles themselves happen to be blooming loud, and in this chateau level, there isn't a lot of sound cover to use to disguise the shot. Instead I use the approach of slowly picking off enemies with melee attacks, before running back out to the French fields and destroying the last target in the area with my sniper rifle. If a sniper shoots his gun and no one is around to hear it, does it even make a sound?

RIFLING THROUGH

On top of the obvious sniper rifles, *Sniper Elite 5* will have a selection of fan favourite pistols, explosives, rifles, SMGs, and more from previous games, and thanks to workbenches dotted around each level, you'll be able to swap your loadout around mid-mission. You can already pick up the guns and gear of some of the soldiers you kill as you go, but the workbenches add another layer of freedom, allowing you to always give those Nazis the personal touch.

If your interest is piqued by *Sniper Elite 5* ahead of the May release date, I'd recommend trying out *Sniper Elite 4*. Though *5* is prettier, crunchier and full of quality-of-life improvements, it does feel like there is an assumption as you play that you'll have seen and felt the series' style before. Between *4* and *5* controls have been made more responsive, the vaulting is more intuitive, and the routes through the level more cleverly guided, to the point that you often feel like you've discovered each path organically. But knowing how to calculate potential bullet drop or what weaponry is worth picking up from dead Nazis feels like presumed knowledge, and anyone who hasn't tried *4* may find themselves fumbling a little with the finer details. Consider this a warning to do your history homework now.

Imogen Mellor

THE PATROLS OF THE GUARDS ARE WOVEN TIGHTLY ENOUGH TO FOIL MY PLANS

Trek to Yomi

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Leonard Menchiari

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
devolverdigital.com

TREK TO YOMI

Captures the style, but not the spirit, of an iconic film director

T*rek to Yomi*'s demo makes it clear that the team behind the game are not only in love with legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa: they've also spent a considerable amount of time studying his work, from Seven Samurai to Yojimbo. Every monochrome area is a feast for the eyes.

Flashes of lightning flood the sky with intense bloom, and foreground scenery is skilfully used to convey a sense of cave-bound claustrophobia, or focus your attention on a particular part of the screen. Wherever you look you'll find faux film grain and digital dirt. There's a texture and life to every scene.

Unfortunately something else became obvious as I played through this side-on sword fighting adventure: copying Kurosawa's visual style doesn't translate to earning any of his films' depth or meaning.

Trek to Yomi kicks off with a familiar premise: an orphaned boy grows into a tough-looking hero with a shiny sword, the only man in the entire village capable of fighting an endless supply of nigh-identical bandits. I don't mind the simplicity, necessarily. What I do mind is that the creative well it's exclusively drawing from tells tales of class wars, politics, and the abuse of power – and seemingly the developer seemingly looked at all that and just said, "Cool swords, bro."

There's nothing wrong with cool swords! But the game straddles an awkward middle ground. It never commits to being a katana-laden brawler that puts its influences to one side for the sake of some all-out sword fighting, but nor does it have the nuance to properly emulate its cinematic inspirations, where a drawn blade is the last resort of a desperate man.

Trek to Yomi idolises the fictionalised concept of samurai as brave and noble defenders of the people, then presents lead hero Hiroki with at least two opportunities to kill groups of enemies with staged environmental hazards in the demo alone, bushido be damned.

IDOLISES THE FICTIONALISED CONCEPT OF SAMURAI AS BRAVE AND NOBLE DEFENDERS

PLAYED IT

SLICE OF LIFE

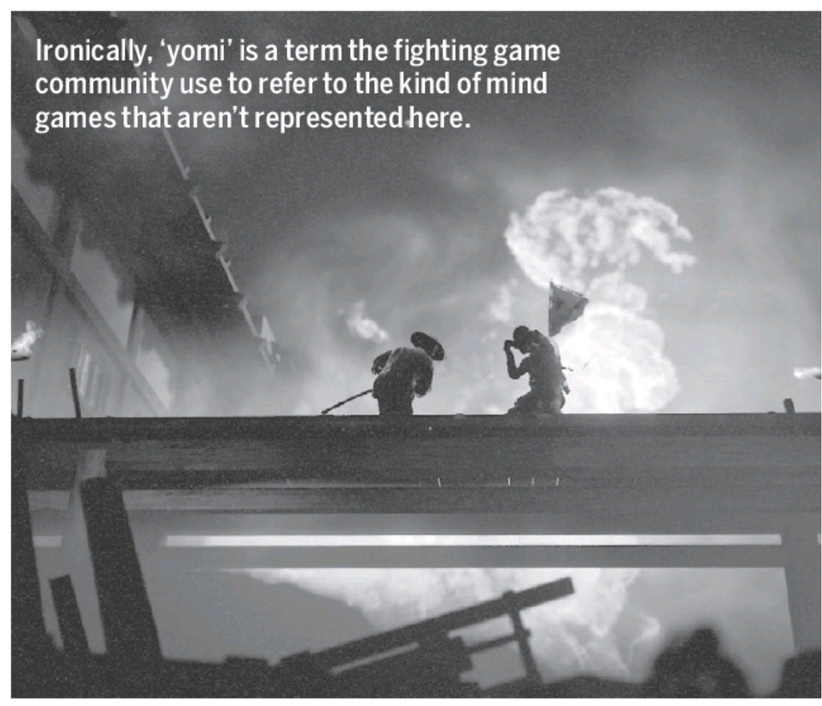
Combat has some heft, but offers chain combos and health upgrades in place of the gut-wrenching mind games in the best film duels. No attempt has been made to convey the tension preceding the all-or-nothing slices of samurai cinema. I don't feel like I can try to psych out my opponents, or that a fight hinges on maintaining the perfect distance before a strike as the wind howls around me.

Counter > X > X, watch your stamina gauge, repeat four times until the next checkpoint. Toshiro Mifune never did that, or anything that looked like it.

The locations these moments take place in are always framed by whatever camera angle makes them look closest to the films they're inspired, by regardless of how practical that may be for the player. At times it leaves you fighting a grey man who might be all of an inch high against a grey background, even though consistently countering his tiny sword may be key to your continued existence. At other times a distracting full-screen film effect appears moments before a duel starts, as if the virtual reel's being changed for the beginning of the fight choreography, even though no serious film director would ever tolerate such amateurish cuts.

Trek to Yomi seems to hope players will be too awed by the visuals to notice what they've actually been given is an ordinary action-slasher experience. The comparisons to landmark moments in cinematic history – comparisons *Trek to Yomi* has invited upon itself – only serve to highlight how far off the game is from capturing the spirit of the films the developers clearly adore.

Kerry Brunskill



Ironically, 'yomi' is a term the fighting game community use to refer to the kind of mind games that aren't represented here.

ABOVE: Is there more to being a samurai than cool swords and distinctive hats? You won't find out here.

LEFT: The camera's more interested in capturing the visuals than aiding you in play.

TURTLE

POWER

TMNT: SHREDDER'S REVENGE revisits the glory days of Ninja Turtles brawlers

BY TED LICHFIELD

By the time I was a kid growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, arcades were already well on their way out. Home gaming on consoles and PCs has long overtaken the hobby's original home, relegating it to a novelty for nostalgia-baiting barcades in gentrified neighbourhoods.

Still, I found my way into arcades over the years: a friend's birthday party at a local pizza joint, or killing time while off on my own during a family vacation. One game that I always ran into without fail was *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time*.

Turtles in Time and its predecessor, simply titled *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, remain the gold standard of *TMNT* games to this day, combining simple, yet fast-paced and explosive combat with drop-in, four-player co-op and the kind of visually striking pixel art backdrops which help 16-bit games remain a favourite of so many players.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge is an attempt to bring the magic of those old arcade classics to PC and consoles, while also sanding the edges and shaping the experience into a better fit for at-home play. Freed from the need to suck up quarters from unskilled players as a business model. and to be short enough to be finishable in a single sitting, *Shredder's Revenge* has the potential to be better than arcade-perfect.

HEROES IN A HALF SHELL

Publisher Dotemu and developer Tribute Games have made their business capturing the joy of this era of gaming. Montreal-based Tribute was founded by ex-Ubisoft veterans who previously worked on games like the *TMNT* movie tie-in for Gameboy

Advance, and the much-beloved *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* brawler for Xbox Live Arcade. It's been responsible for numerous retro revival indie projects, including the Gameboy Color-esque puzzle shooter *Wizorb* and the *Megaman*-inspired platformer, *Panzer Paladin*.

French developer/publishing house Dotemu has had an extensive body of work in the retro space, putting out ports of classic games like the Steam re-releases of the early *Final Fantasies*, as well as original projects like the upcoming *Metal Slug Tactics* or *Streets of Rage 4* – a continuation of a different beloved sidescrolling beat-'em-up staple.

Tribute had been pitching Nickelodeon on a potential Ninja Turtles project for several years to no avail. When Dotemu was approached by Nickelodeon and given a list of potential properties to adapt in a new game, its first choice was TMNT. Upon finding out about Tribute's long campaign for a Ninja Turtles project through the Game Developers Conference grapevine, the two development houses made contact and began collaborating on a new Ninja Turtles brawler: what we now know as *Shredder's Revenge*.

I had the chance to view a demo of the studios' collaborative revival of *Shredder's Revenge* and talk to Dotemu CEO Cyrille Imbert and Tribute Games co-founders Jean-Francois Major and Jonathan Lavigne. They characterise this *TMNT* project as being in conversation with their earlier efforts. Some of the Tribute veterans who came over from Ubisoft are relishing the opportunity to get another crack at the licence, feeling the GBA tie-in wasn't able to live up to its full potential, while Imbert is clear that *Streets of Rage 4* was very much an influence on *Shredder's Revenge*, even joking that *SoF4* "reassured us that beat-'em-ups could still be a thing".

I've seen the game's first, second and fourth stages, and I'm impressed with *Shredder's Revenge*. Each mission begins with an animated cutscene just like the arcade games, with retro charm and an art style closer to the 1987 Ninja Turtles cartoon than anything that's come since. The developers tell me that they want each mission to feel like an episode of that TV show – self-contained, but feeding into a larger story.

Up to four players can choose any of the games' six characters in each mission, but the demo is limited to two players, though each cycles through the different characters to showcase their differences for me. The first mission sees Michelangelo and Leonardo trying to rescue a TV station under attack by long-time Turtles villain and pig-man Bebop. Right away what stands out to me – aside from the detailed pixel art characters and environments – is that each turtle now has his own moveset, complete with run cycles, special moves, and the relative strength of each of their attacks.

TURTLE TIER LIST

Lavigne tells me that they started small: just slight differences in speed or attack strength between each of the Turtles to mix up the experience. But it grew from there. "We wanted to differentiate them more and more. We looked into translating their personalities more into their movesets. Some of it came from the animations, like the animators were excited and pushed for a move."

In the original arcade games, there were only cosmetic differences between each character, but gameplay was functionally the same. Now the Turtles move at different speeds, have unique weapon hitboxes and charge attacks, and even have unique mobility options. Michelangelo, for example, can bounce from enemy to enemy by landing on top of them, and Raphael's divekick knocks enemies into the air. It serves to lend a layer of strategy and synergy to your choice of character and how they play.

As the demo proceeds through the TV station, the meticulous pixel art environments continue to catch my attention. Enemies engage in fun ambient actions, like one Foot Clan ninja who idly occupies the reception desk of the station, or numerous others who are ransacking the offices or playing on Game Boys before the Turtles catch their attention. It all contributes to a sense of cartoony joy.

The level consists of several fights in business offices, the sets of

ABOVE: Phone booths, banks of TVs, and a breakdancing mat – these are truly turtles out of time.

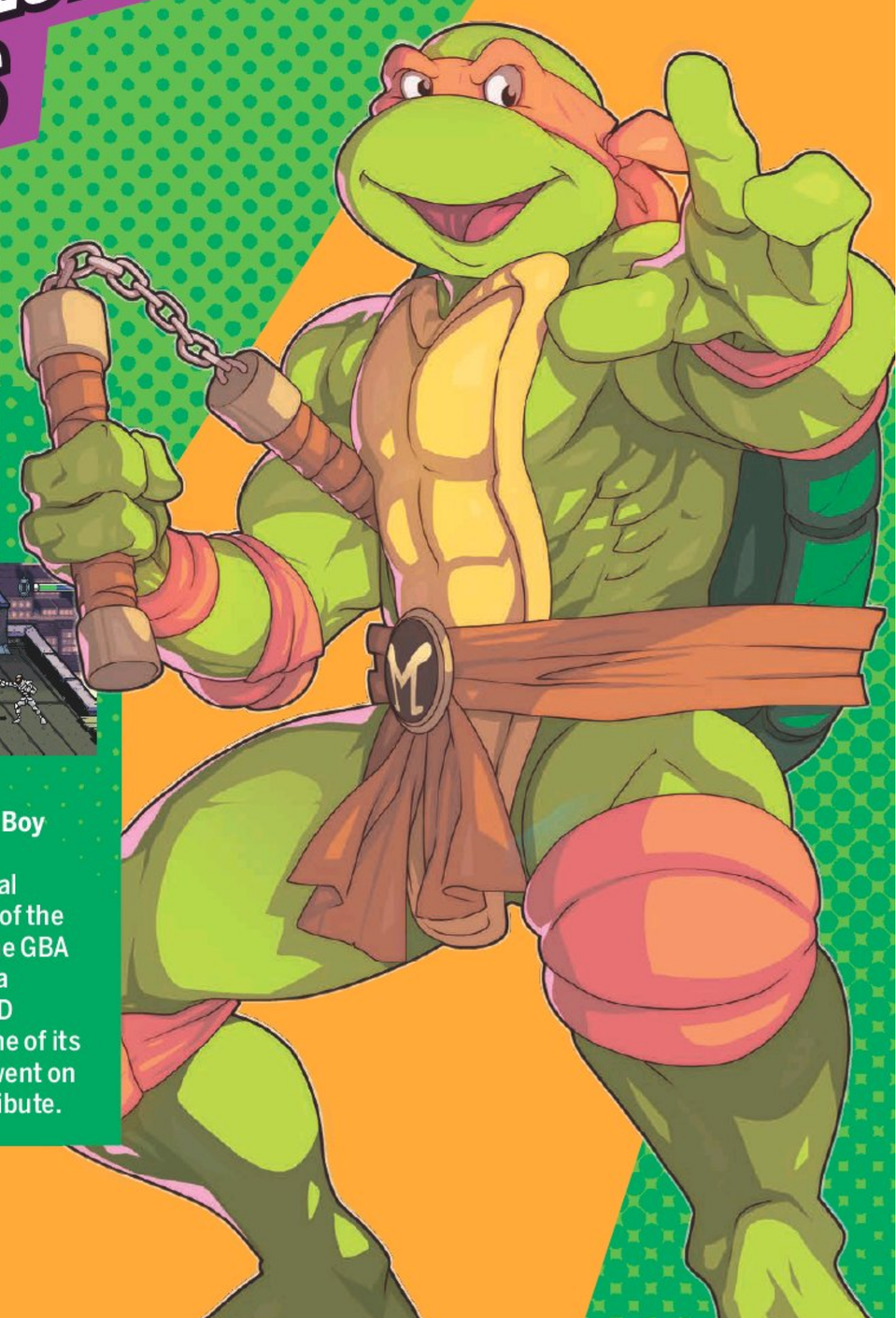
LEFT: April and Donatello drop their special attacks at the same time.

a workout video, cooking show, and finally the news desk before culminating in a boss fight against the porcine villain, Bebop. He has an eclectic set of melee attacks and grows more aggressive as his health bar drops, but this early level doesn't seem to too tricky to get through on the whole.

The second mission consists of some gritty New York city streets under attack by the rhino-faced Rocksteady. The players take control of Donatello and long-time TMNT side character April O'Neil, in a rare playable appearance. Donatello attacks slower but with a longer range than other characters, and April brings increased speed with decreased damage per hit. She uses a reporter's microphone as a bludgeon, alongside a spin attack with a TV camera as her special move.

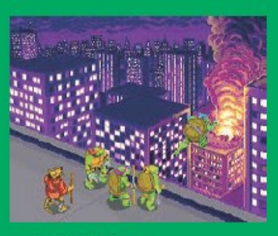
Going through the stage, it really evokes a 1980s cartoon notion of city streets, complete with chop shops, Foot Clan graffiti, and delightfully anachronistic banks of TVs in shop windows showing a broadcast from

THE TURTLES HAVE UNIQUE WEAPON HITBOXES AND CHARGE ATTACKS



GHOSTS OF TURTLES PAST

The influences on **Shredder's Revenge**



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
1989, Arcade
Not the very first TMNT videogame, but a huge hit – it went on to be the highest-grossing arcade game of the 1990s.

TMNT: TURTLES IN TIME
1991, Arcade
This is the one I played as a kid: bigger, faster, and prettier than the first brawler. *Turtles in Time* was everything you'd want out of a beat-'em-up sequel.

TMNT
2007, Game Boy Advance
One of several adaptations of the '07 movie, the GBA version was a throwback 2D brawler. Some of its developers went on to work at Tribute.

» Bebop – a cute nod to the previous mission. About halfway through, Donatello reveals a secret by attacking an apartment door in the background of one of the scenes: frequent TMNT side character Irma appears, thanks the players, and goes on her way. Major and Lavigne imply that this figures into a sequence of interactions with the character, and that there will be other such NPC side objectives in the game.

BEAT THAT

This brings me to one of Tribute and Dotemu's biggest priorities with the project: making a beat-'em-up that satisfies the demands of a modern audience, while preserving the DNA of the genre. Lavigne reveals that the game will include a full story campaign, as well as secrets, NPC interactions like the one with Irma, and "light progression elements". It's a delicate balance to strike – you wouldn't want a game like this to go overboard with skill trees, experience points, or other modern AAA staples. But ahead of the demo I was certainly curious how the devs would ensure *Shredder's Revenge*'s feels like a full package to a 2022 player.

The old arcade games were meant to be beaten in one sitting after all, and a full playthrough of *Turtles in Time* by a competent team could take under 40 minutes. That's where Dotemu's experience on *Streets of Rage 4* comes in handy, with the player feedback on that game informing future development. Cyrile tells me that it helped the company "learn what the expectations of the modern beat-'em-up community are".

The team keeps the game's third stage under wraps for the time being and shows me the fourth level of *Shredder's Revenge*, called Rumble at the Zoo, choosing Raphael and Master Splinter to attempt to thwart an attack on Central Park by Groundchuck and Dirtbag. The level maintains the high quality of background art as it shifts from a classic Central Park scene – complete with destructible public chess boards – through tiger and monkey enclosures and a reptile

THE GENEROUS ATTACK HITBOXES SHOULD BRING ITS FEEL MORE IN LINE WITH MODERN 3D ACTION GAMES

house. In contrast to the easier early going, this level seems designed to make you sweat. As it goes on, I observe increasingly dense – though never random – enemy spawns. The Foot Clan troopers always enter in formation, and some of the level hazards coming in from off-screen remind me of twitch reflex platforming challenges in games such as *Celeste* or *Super Meat Boy*. Lavigne tells me that they want to reflect a certain pace of play characteristic of the old *TMNT* titles: "The enemies all enter in formations and patterns – it's very rhythmic. That's something that's a bit different from *Streets of Rage*. When you play *TMNT* you have to get in that rhythm."

ABOVE: The Foot Clan really like to make themselves at home wherever they go.

TOP RIGHT: Leo and Mikey battle on the set of a sitcom.

COIN MUNCHER NO MORE

The dual boss fight with Dirtbag and Groundchuck reveals another concession to modern design trends over classic beat-'em-ups: players are able to revive each other when they deplete all of their health instead of immediately losing a life, a similar mechanic to co-op FPS games like *Left 4 Dead*. The developers demonstrate a similar commitment to anti-frustration changes in the way basic attacks function. Lavigne and Major describe the subtle tweaks they've made to attack hitboxes, a "slight homing" that should make *Shredder's Revenge* feel better to play than its arcade ancestors. In the original titles, the Turtles had to line up perfectly with their opponents on the Z-axis for attacks to land, an idiosyncrasy of early 2.5D design sensibilities. The more generous attack hitboxes of *Shredder's Revenge* bring its feel more in line with the feel of modern 3D action games. In other words, if you whiff, you've no one to blame but yourself.

This early look convinces me that *Shredder's Revenge* is ready to deliver on its promise of TMNT arcade goodness. It nails the retro look and style, and modern additions like online multiplayer, a story campaign, and light progression elements strike me as thoughtful choices to ease the beat-'em-up's transition from arcade cabinets to homes. As the demo plays out, part of me is already back at Papa Passero's pizzeria, seeing how far I can get on a pocket full of change. There's still a magic to nostalgia like that – especially when you can summon it up on your PC. ■

STAT SHEET

***Let's break down each character's fighting style in* Shredder's Revenge**

DONATELLO
He's the slowest attacker of the group, but the long range of his bo staff ensures he can still get the hits in.

MICHELANGELO
The opposite of Donnie – his nunchaku are super fast, but he needs to get in close to hit with them.

LEONARDO
With his dual swords, Leonardo achieves a balance of strength, speed, and range – he's the blue-masked Mario of the group.

RAPHAEL
With his dual sai and anger management problems, Raph hits like a truck – but, like Mikey, he has a short range.

APRIL O'NEIL
An ace reporter needs to be fast to chase stories – but a microphone isn't the best weapon, so her damage is low.

MASTER SPLINTER
Decades of wisdom help him hit hard, but decades of arthritis make him pretty slow.

Superfuse

ABOVE: Even superheroes need to do their chores.

RIGHT: Fight bosses, and maybe end up fighting your bosses.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Stitch Heads Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
superfusegame.com

SUPERFUSE

Become the hero of your nightmares

OK, so we're all a little tired of superheroes at this point. With the ever growing Marvel Cinematic Universe and however many Batmans we have now, you probably think you've had enough of both great powers and great responsibilities. But I promise you you've never seen superheroes quite like the ones in *Superfuse*.

This action-RPG takes place far in the future, a time when the people of Earth have gone on to populate other areas of space led by gods. And by gods, we're talking billionaires evolved by science to the point they're undying, domineering dictators of the universe. You play one of their lackeys.

Not only have these gods altered themselves, but they've also taken on an army of supercharged mercenaries (that's you) called Enforcers. Which doesn't exactly make it sound like you're playing the good guys, right? Well it seems like that's a key part of the story – you're going to have to explore the idea of what being a hero really means in the face of metaphorically parasitic employers, but also literally parasitic alien beings called the Corruption. You'll have to face this threat while acknowledging your part in the dystopian future of the human race – and, seemingly, uncovering a dark conspiracy on your own side.

All that's very intriguing, but where *Superfuse* really drew me in was when I saw its combat system. The game aims to allow you to fully craft a superhero's abilities and powers, right down to the finest details.

I got to go hands-on with one of the base characters, the Berserker. Each hero will have their own set of talents and abilities, and this muscle-bound monster can be exactly what you'd expect – namely a tank with a huge axe who makes a mess of the enemy. But equally, with the right options, those broad shoulders can be just for show. You can make your Berserker into more a squishy wizard type, for example, just by investing in the right paths.

HERO WORSHIP

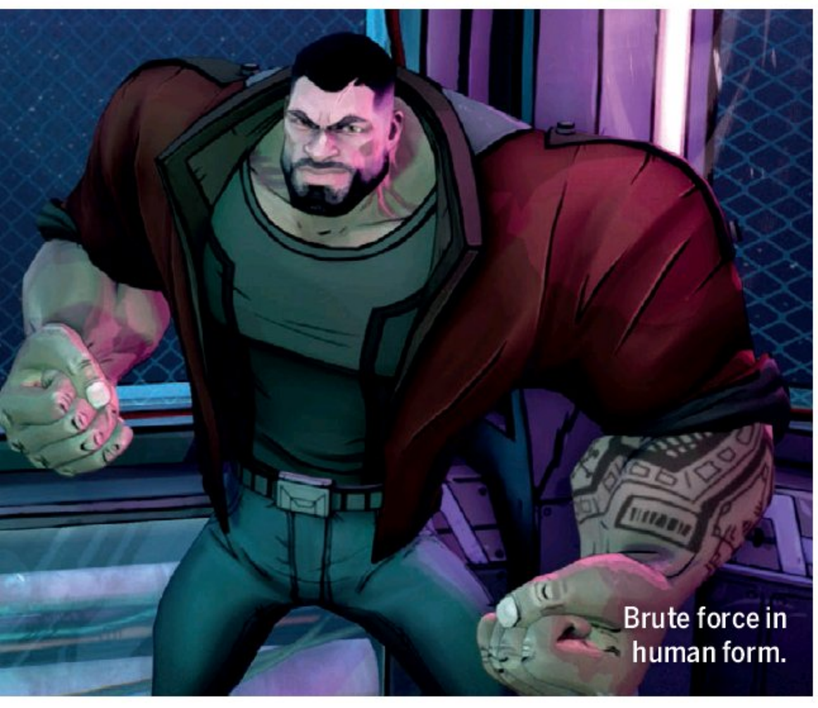
Each talent can be individually customised to your liking. You want your axe slam move to launch you forward? You got it. How about upon use the area of effect splits more and more? Yeah you can do that too. Or maybe it's splitting too much and you want to narrow its focus and make its range larger? Yep, fully up to you mate. Even just a basic lightning blast lets you choose exactly what it does upon casting, upon hitting an enemy, upon killing an enemy, all the way up to what it does as an after-effect. Every time I thought I'd seen it all, a new layer of customisation was revealed. The vision of *Superfuse* really is that detailed, and it's up to you to construct your superhero exactly the way you like them.

PLAYED IT

The best part? You can do all this on the fly and respec at will. If you're not quite happy with the way you've crafted your melee attack, or you think an explosion of lightning is more suited to the beginning of your cast, rather than the end, you can change that at any moment away from combat. Reassess on the go. Full combat customisation freedom. Neat.

This is looking like far more than just another injection of superhero content, then. Not only does the wildly extensive customisation play into anyone's comic book fantasies, it opens the floor to a ridiculous variety of builds and playstyles for min-maxers and number nerds – just the thing for keeping an action-RPG as fresh as possible for as long as possible. If only there was a talent we could equip that would force the developer to give us a release date...

Imogen Mellor



Brute force in human form.

AIMS TO ALLOW YOU TO CRAFT A SUPERHERO'S POWERS DOWN TO THE FINEST DETAILS

THE MAKING OF

SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

As the series' return sneaks up on us, we debrief Sam Fisher's finest outing with its creators

By Robert Zak

In a nocturnal world of oily shadows, where darkness cuts into damp surfaces illuminated by solitary swinging lightbulbs, the green-goggled man is king. By the time the third entry in the *Splinter Cell* series, *Chaos Theory*, was released in 2005, we were already well acquainted with Sam Fisher's skill set; with just a year between this and his previous outing, we *thought* we knew what to expect, and expectations were high.

But in that short time between the two games, the industry straddled a technological revolution like Sam Fisher straddles a narrow corridor with his split-jump; unthinkable things became possible through untapped tech like normal mapping and HDR lighting, playing right into – while also shaping – Ubisoft's vision for *Chaos Theory*. This wouldn't just be the third iteration of an already excellent series, but one of the greatest stealth games of all time.

After *Pandora Tomorrow* was made by Ubisoft Shanghai, development on the third game returned to where it all began – Ubisoft Montreal. The focus at this time was on making games work on the original Xbox, and the presence of former Nvidia chip designer Danny Lepage as a programmer on the game meant the team had insider knowledge on how to maximise the console's graphical horsepower (and in turn not restrict the PC version).

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

"Danny understood from a deep engineering perspective how the Xbox video card worked, unlocking some of the potential for shaders, normal maps, things like that," says the game's lead designer Clint Hocking. "None of us had ever seen a normal map before. John Carmack was still writing forum posts trying to describe it. Then when we started to see that stuff we were like, 'Oh my God, this looks amazing!' It totally upended our understanding of what game visuals could be."

CONTROLLED CHAOS

Normal maps, which 'unflatten' textures by giving them the illusion of depth and distorted reflections from light sources, became a must for *Chaos Theory*. Meanwhile, the team's rendering framework – facilitated by the power of DirectX 9 – was so powerful at rendering reflection effects that it set something of an elemental theme for the entire game: water. "The reflections were so unique that we felt they could become part of the game's identity, the same way that shadow casting was an identity of the original *Splinter Cell*," producer Mathieu Ferland tells me.

Chaos Theory foregrounds its aquatic theme right from the start – a lighthouse off the coast of Peru where a computer programmer is being held hostage. Weaving your way through a cave system glistening with moisture, you emerge into spitting weather conditions, at which point Sam's distinctive rubberised stealth suit takes on a glossy sheen (mercifully, not a factor in your visibility to enemies). During this mission, you can see enemies through the condensation-blurred glass at the top of the lighthouse, and go through damp tunnels where the walls glisten with humidity and look so coarse that you feel you could run your hands along their uneven surface and come away with moisture on your fingertips.

Set in the clammiest parts of New York, Japan, and areas around the South Pacific, *Chaos Theory* is a game obsessed with wetness, and takes every opportunity to show off the verisimilitude proffered by the tech of the time, and the studio's ability to implement them. Crucially, all these technical advancements were in service of the *Splinter Cell* stealth experience, which would also make some serious leaps in *Chaos Theory*.

SIM PULL

Clint Hocking was inspired by immersive sims, particularly *Deus Ex* and what he would in a later essay call its "meaningful agency across the narrative, progression and input levels of play". With the series' stealth foundations well established by 2004, Hocking saw an opportunity to start exploring some of those more ambitious design philosophies.

The last thing an unobservant guard fails to see before they die.

LESSONS IN STEALTH

The next* Splinter Cell *will need to build on its best tricks

THROWN OBJECTS

In *Chaos Theory*, the AI doesn't just doggedly investigate the place a thrown object lands, but if they see it in flight they'll first investigate where the object came from. Clever.

LIGHT LOGIC

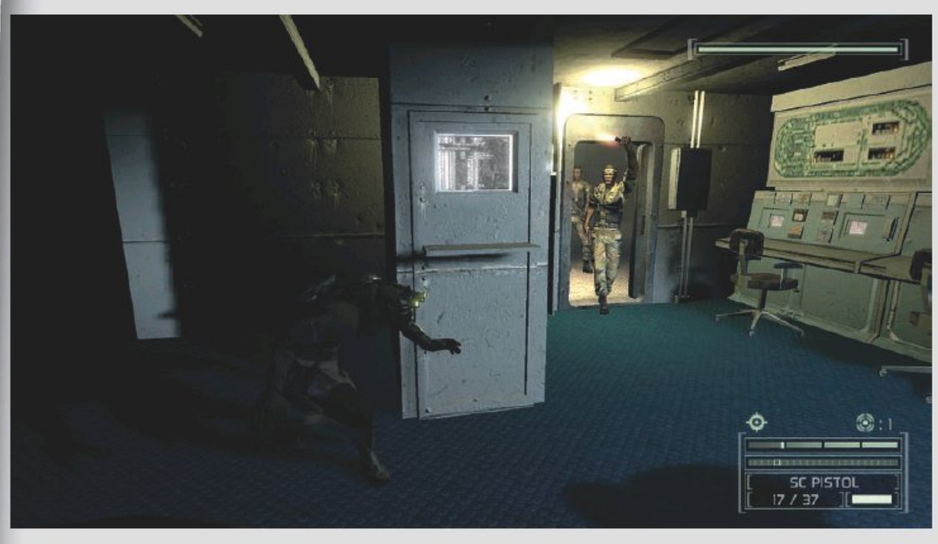
Every source of light affects your visibility – from overhead bulbs to glowing computer screens and the intermittent red flashes of a bomb you're trying to defuse.

AI ON EDGE

The more suspicious sounds an enemy hears, the more anxious they become; do a little rustling in the bushes and they'll dismiss it, but do it a few times and they'll come a-snoopin'.

REFLECTIONS

These days, games seem to have given up on making mirrors 'work,' but in *Chaos Theory* enemies could spot you through mirrors. Surely it's time for mirrors to make a comeback...



ABOVE: Sam's anti-smoking campaign gets started in earnest.

FAR LEFT: *Chaos Theory* utilised breakthrough graphics tech to create a moody shadow-filled world.

At the crux of this would be doing away with the previous games' automatic game over when players would trigger alarms too many times. "It was my mandate from the very first day that there is no game over in this game," says Hocking. "The game has to carry on and it has to adapt to your actions. And that was enormously difficult. It really put a lot of pressure on the team, but thinking that way also unlocked our ability to make those things work."

This led to the rise of what Mathieu Ferland calls a 'loop of emotion': the process of keeping a player constantly engaged in a loop of slowly building tension, which may (or may not) culminate in a brief explosion of action or violence when you get spotted, which then makes way for relief when we escape or evade a scenario. Then the loop restarts and the tension builds again...

We as players had to adapt too. Without a game over to bail us out, we had to think on our feet when guards stumbled upon bodies and would start walking towards the room we were hiding in. We'd flatten ourselves against walls, try to recall escape routes through windows and vents, and rely more on specialist moves like clinging to pipes, split-jumps or even sacrilegiously shooting our way out of trouble. *Chaos Theory* forced us to be truly *present* through some seriously sticky situations.

CHAOS THEORY FORCED US TO BE TRULY PRESENT THROUGH SOME SERIOUSLY STICKY SITUATIONS

Sound design and music helped sustain this loop, and Amon Tobin's score was integral to that. The electronic music producer – renowned for his experimental and often arrhythmic music that ranges from liquidy ambient beats to industrial drum & bass – was brought onboard after Ubisoft used his music for an internal gameplay video. Tobin's soundtrack was exceptional, from the disruptive snares and drum rolls that kick in when you get caught to the cool bassy twanging and spectral radio chatter of the stealth themes.

I reached out to Tobin to talk about his contribution to the game. "The motivation was to write music that was not typical for a game at the time, in that it took its influence from both vintage film scores (like the work of Mission: Impossible theme composer Lalo Schifrin) and what I was playing at clubs, namely d'n'b," he tells me. "The idea of music intensity adapting to gameplay was also not something that had been technically achievable to the degree

ABOVE: Another characteristically damp assassination.

FAR RIGHT: You can remotely (but only temporarily) disable security devices and hack computers.

we wanted at that moment. It drew out technical innovation from Ubisoft along with creative challenges, such as making sure individual layers of a composition were as musically compelling as the sum of their parts."

STEALTH INSPECTOR

Expanding the player's freedom also required expanding the level design. Whereas previous games offered multiple stealthy solutions for getting through a given room or sequence, their relative linearity made it easy for the game to highlight the threats and challenges you'd face in each section. Individual missions were conveniently broken into segments separated by loading screens, effectively wiping clean whatever mess of snoozing bodies and broken lights you may have left in your wake.

In contrast, *Chaos Theory*'s maps were seamless stealth sandboxes which had to account for the possibility that you could enter most spaces from any angle, bypass some areas altogether, or even 'break' the narrative flow. You could mess around with the order you did objectives, or what angle you'd approach certain scripted scenes from, and the dialogue with Headquarters would change depending on the bespoke path you carved through a mission.

"ANYBODY IN THE TEAM COULD PROPOSE A CONTEXTUAL IDEA RELATED TO A SITUATION"

But within these sandboxes were dozens of special moments, where you could slice through a Japanese Shoji wall to grab a guard from the other side, or with a meticulously placed barrel indulge in a bit of explosive Tom Cruise-style swagger. At one point I was shimmying along a pipe when, right on cue, a guard peered through a doorway, forcing me to instinctively hang upside-down and plip him in the face with my silencer. These moments were sporadic, but broke up the stealth flow in an extremely engaging way.

Many of these seemingly incidental moments were handcrafted, conceived even before the levels themselves and based on a giant internal repository of stickmen. "There was this documentation where anybody in the team could propose a contextual idea related to a situation – whether it's upside-down interrogations or pulling an enemy over a rail," Ferland recalls. "Those ideas were coming from stickman drawings. Even if there were multiple paths, we wanted to find a way to pull the player into those scenes."

When I ask Hocking about his favourite level, he immediately gives me the Panamanian Bank – an early mission that sees Fisher starting out in the grounds of a palatial building, and work his way in before freely exploring its vast interior. The initial approach is classic *Splinter Cell*, as you work your way up to the roof of the building and drop in through a skylight. Once you're inside, the level becomes a maze of opportunities.

LEVEL UP

Keeping these levels seamless wasn't easy, due the lack of streaming tech built into Unreal Engine 2.5 and the high demands of normal mapping and high-fidelity texture assets. "Breaking the levels into small pieces was going to force them to be super linear, like there would literally only be three rooms and then another level and then three rooms and then another level. So we wouldn't even be able to make the game we wanted to make," Hocking tells me. "We had to write a streaming solution, and had programmers just work full-time so that whichever way a player took through a level, you'd move through chokepoints and they're dumping textures behind you and loading textures in front of you."

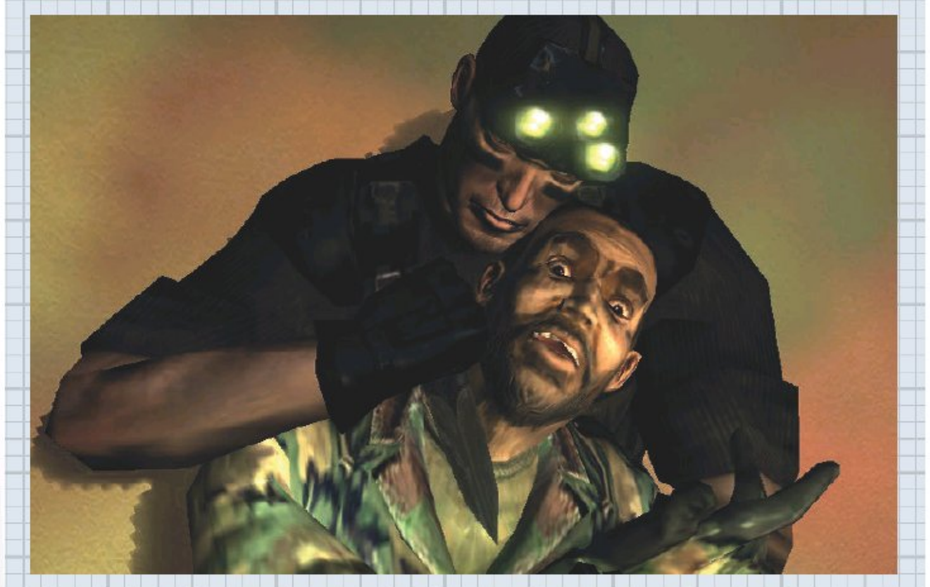
Chaos Theory was more than just the latest 'one-a-year' iteration in a prolific Ubisoft series, it was a peak of stealth gaming. It cast a long shadow over the series, which would later water down some of its identity by opting for a more linear, fast-paced experience (more or less parallel to when *Hitman Absolution* and the *Thief* remake seemingly forgot the defining qualities of their predecessors). But now, with *Splinter Cell* set to return after a decade's hiatus, it has a chance to return to – and build on – the design ethos that made *Chaos Theory* so special.

With so much to evolve in such a short span of time, the development process took its toll on Hocking, whose obsession to deliver his vision often saw him working 80-hour weeks of his own accord. "I'd only been making games for three years. I didn't realise how much trouble I'd put myself in," he remembers. "I sometimes question whether it was really worth it. In the end I feel like it was. I'm very proud of it and it's something I'll be proud of for the rest of my life."

There's a contemplative moment of silence before Hocking adds a caveat so common among relentlessly driven creatives. "But it wasn't free," he concludes. "It wasn't free." ■

FISHER'S TIPS IN PERSUASION

Sam Fisher's dialogue when he captures an enemy is some of the sharpest in the series



THE LOGICAL PUTDOWN

Sam: Give me some intelligence or you'll be pushing up daisies in a cemetery full of guys just like you.
Guard: I don't have any intelligence.
Sam: Hey, you just called yourself stupid.

THE REMINDER WHO'S IN CHARGE

Sam: What are you doing here?
Guard: I would ask you the same.
Sam: I have a knife. You go first.

THE FAKE ORDERS FROM 'HIGHER UP'

Sam to HQ: "He's not talking, should I kill him?
HQ to Sam: "Negative, Negative"
Sam to Guard: "OK, they say I should kill you so..."

'THIS IS JUST A DRILL SO PLAY ALONG' ROUTINE

Guard: Wait a minute, is this a training exercise?
Sam: Ugh, damn. Support! This guy knows it's an exercise, who let the cat out of the bag?

Intro

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

GAMES THIS ISSUE

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

GUNDALF

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS is still very much a Borderlands banter-shooter

By Jody Macgregor

Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep, the *Borderlands 2* expansion that doubled as a loving parody of Dungeons & Dragons, came out in 2013. That was a year before fifth edition revitalised interest in Dungeons & Dragons, two years before Critical Role premiered. At the time, jokes about Dungeons & Dragons seemed pretty niche.

It was a surprising move for a shooter expansion, but it sure did pay off, hitting an untapped vein and quickly becoming everyone's favourite DLC. In 2022, though? D&D is popular as it's ever been, approaching cultural oversaturation, and *Tiny Tina'sWonderlands* returns to a well that's close to running dry.

While it looks like a bouncy fantasy-comedy, it plays like *Borderlands*. Specifically, *Borderlands 3*. Some of the guns shoot crossbow bolts and the grenades have been replaced by spells, but moment-to-moment it's typical *Borderlands* – you shoot hordes of bad guys who repeat pithy one-liners, then compare loot to see if the new guns and shields are better than the old ones, and then do it again.

Being a review of a *Borderlands* game, I'm obliged by law to tell you about the best guns its randomised loot pool spat out for me. A sniper rifle that fired sawblades, each of which did higher damage the more sawblades were already in a target, was a highlight. The Tediore guns that don't need to be reloaded – instead transforming into throwable explosives then teleporting a fully-loaded replacement into your empty hands – have returned, and I got one that didn't become an explosive but instead became a laser pixie that harassed bad guys. Another summoned hydra heads that vomited poison. Which was nice.

I spent most of my time as a Spore Warden, a kind of fungal ranger

One significant change is character creation. Rather than each class being tied to an individual character, you play as a nameless newbie, building a face and colour scheme and choosing a voice (you can even alter the pitch, an option I haven't seen since *Saints Row IV*), and then choose any class you want.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A spin-off that's bigger than an expansion, smaller than a standalone *Borderlands* game

DEVELOPER
Gearbox Software

PUBLISHER
2K Games

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
2kgam.es/3LVOG52

GET A (MUSH)ROOM

I spent most of my time as a Spore Warden, a kind of fungal ranger with a walking mushroom pet I upgraded so he farted poison. A few of the classes get NPC allies; my co-op buddy played a Graveborn who had a floating skull friend. My mushroom companion really came into his own when I played solo, even able to revive me when I dropped in the absence of a co-op partner. While co-op is a chaotic good time like always, having an NPC ally makes playing alone an even more viable option, and it was already a totally satisfying way to play.

Of course, I had to revive the friendly fungus sometimes too, which got me into trouble more than once. Though actually the worst thing about him was how distracting he was. He'd hop around in the background when quest givers were talking, his floating title 'MUSHROOM COMPANION' appearing in big white letters visible over the NPC's face. His detailed buttocks were distracting too.

The Spellshot's class ability, being able to slot in two spells rather than one, seemed underwhelming at first, but when you get spells that drop ice meteors on skeletons – who take bonus frost damage because they don't have skin to keep them warm, just go with it – it seems worth it. But the Stabbomancer being able to throw a spinning melee weapon that becomes a blade tornado you can reposition around the battlefield? That's my current fave.

Melee weapons are a new addition, but not a game-changing one. Your regular melee attack, still mapped to V for some reason, becomes a whack with whatever sword, axe, or stick you've picked up. They've got randomised stats, though nothing as wild as the guns. Same with armour, which mostly boosts your class abilities like relics do in the mainline *Borderlands* games, rather than providing any actual protection.

YOUR DM

Anatomy of a Dungeon Master

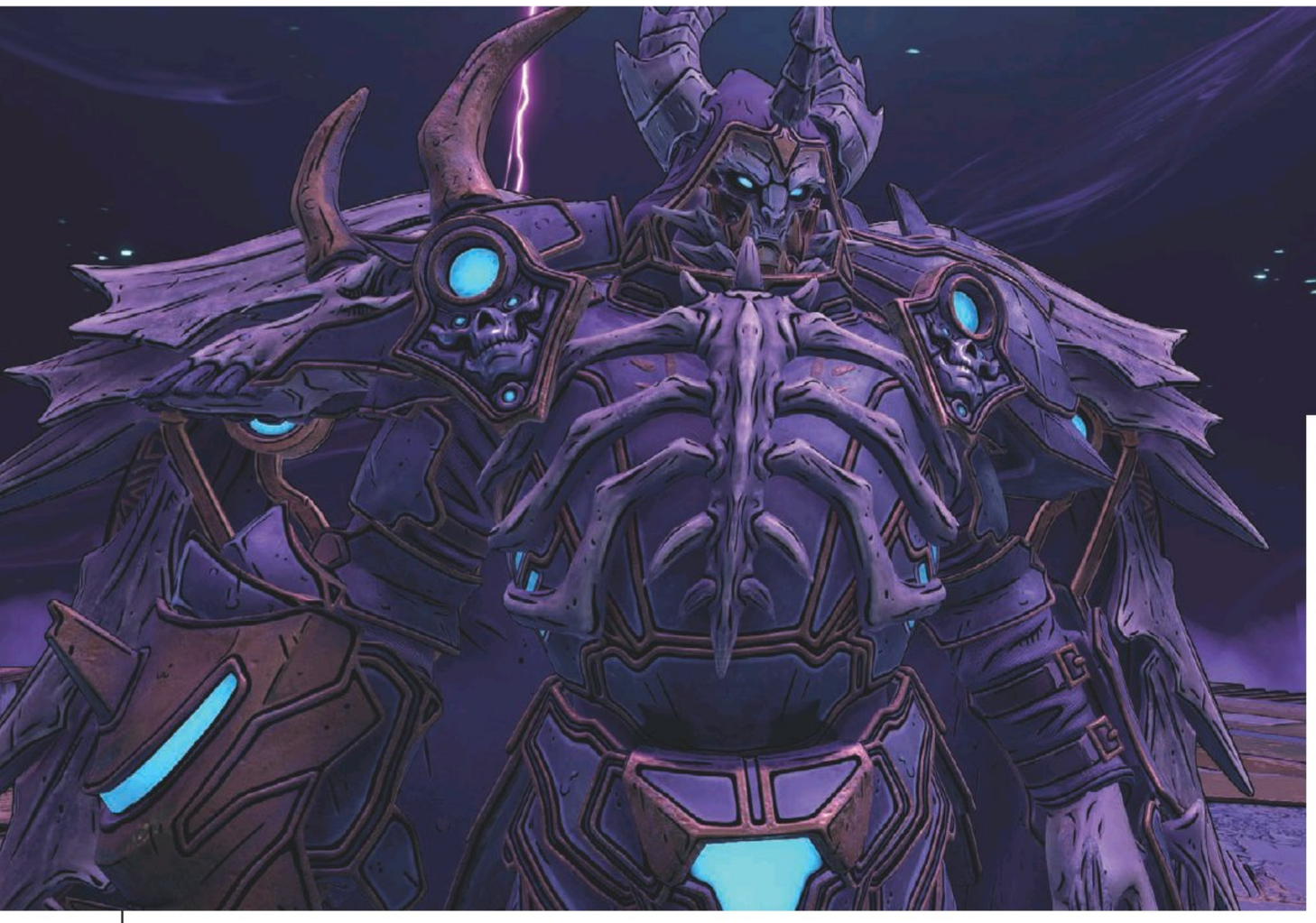
1 CAFFEINE PROCESSING
Wake-up juice keeps a DM alert to shenanigans.

2 THE POWER OF IMAGINATION
Also known as: stealing bits from movies.

3 SNACK PROCESSING
80% sugary treats by weight.

4 DICE HAND
For fudging rolls as the story demands.

5 ENCOUNTER DESIGN
"I'll just put in one puzzle door, they'll love it."



Will Arnett's been working out.

RIGHT: Legolas upgraded his bow.

FAR RIGHT: Gearbox has Andy Samberg money these days.

The bridge made from an eraser is a nice touch.

SKILL YOUR DARLINGS

While each class in the previous games had multiple skill trees, here they've only got one (though they do unlock a second active special, like the stabbomancer getting an option to turn invisible instead of throw a knife tornado). Instead, build diversity comes from multiclassing once you've hit higher levels, picking a second class to bolt on. My Spore Warden multiclassed into Spellshot, becoming a sporcerer. I mostly just stuck to reliable fungus powers, though. After playing a certain amount of *Pathfinder*, the thought of having to galaxy-brain my way into overpowered class interactions ever again makes me feel ill.

On my RTX 3080, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* ran at over 100fps most of the time, though cutscenes are locked to 30fps. The only time it stuttered was when I'd get error messages saying my connection to the Shift network, which you need to sign up to for the multiplayer and sweet loot scored via redeeming Shift keys, was down. Another message saying the connection was back up would immediately follow, accompanied by a lurch. Oddly, it never happened in multiplayer, but was a regular occurrence solo.

Like previous *Borderlands* games, you'll want to push the FoV up and the look sensitivity down. Weirdly, the hotspot for the left arrow on every menu slider is slightly off. You can click on the right arrows fine, but have to click sort of near but not actually on the left arrows.

One last change worth noting has to do with the overworld map. Rather than zooming across empty spaces in vehicles, the areas between zones are filled by a tilt-shifted, top-down tabletop world covered in dice, big-headed figurines, and spilled junk food. It's super cute, and full of sidequests as well as random encounters that trigger combat arenas when you're walking through patches of long grass.

That's a *Pokémon* reference of course, but a lot of the trademark *Borderlands* reference-heavy humour in *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* goes for targets that aren't RPGs. There are extended storylines that riff on The Smurfs, Don Quixote and *Monkey Island*, among others. The last one's especially baffling, since *Monkey Island* was a pretty funny game to begin with and redoing it with Guybrush Threepwood as a skeleton named Bones Three-Wood is substantially less funny.

Every now and then a bit lands with startling precision, though, usually when your advisors – two fellow players voiced by Andy Samberg and Wanda Sykes – riff on roleplaying stereotypes. They'll be familiar to anyone who has played D&D or games like it. He's the one who cares about backstory and wants to solve every problem via seduction; she's the one who knows all the rules and how to efficiently kill everything.

Sometimes it's painfully accurate to the experience of tabletop RPGs

Sometimes it's painfully accurate to the experience of tabletop RPGs, like when the players fixate on minor NPCs they've decided to distrust for arbitrary reasons while Tina fails to convince them to move on. That made me wince, but I was smiling through the pain. To its credit, and my surprise, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* actually does find some fresh angles to come at a comedy about roleplaying.

It's funnier than *Borderlands 3*, that's for sure. It helps that Will Arnett, as the Dragon Lord, makes an amusing villain. Because of course he does: He's Will Arnett. Smug monologuing is his entire thing, and if he never quite equals Handsome Jack from *Borderlands 2* that's only because nobody will.

RETURN TO OZ

I went back to the *Borderlands 2* DLC that inspired *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* to see how I felt about it today, and while I missed some of the quality-of-life features added in *Borderlands 3* that made it into *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* – like mantling, not having to hold down E to pick up ammo, being able to fast-travel from anywhere, and only having to do side quests to be appropriately levelled for the main questline occasionally rather than all the bloody time – it was a riot.

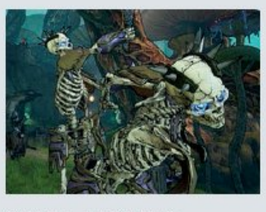
If anything, I like it even more now. That DLC wasn't just a bundle of jokes about the guy who throws his dice too hard or what it's like to fumble a skill check to do something so basic you probably shouldn't have rolled for it in the first place. It was also a fantasy retelling of *Borderlands 2*, the cast reimagined as knights and sorcerers like it was The Wizard of Oz. The thing it most effectively parodied was itself.

Meanwhile, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* is largely disconnected from the *Borderlands* games it slots between, with only a handful of cameos (including Claptrap, sorry to all of you haters). That feels like a missed opportunity, given that *Borderlands 3* was kind of a disaster, and a follow-up that took the piss out of it would have had a lot of material to work with.

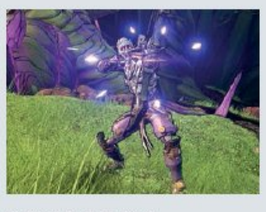
It still succeeds more often than it fails, though. That's partly just because of how the *Borderlands* formula has been honed over the years. While other looter-shooters bolt on crafting systems or try to make you care about gear levels and repeatable activities and collecting 15 different kinds of shards (why is it always shards?), *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* is simply another game of shooting bad guys with ridiculous guns so you can take even more ridiculous guns off their corpses. And sometimes, in-between that, it delivers a gag about what a mess the average game of D&D is that hits me like a knife in the heart. ■

MONSTER MANUAL

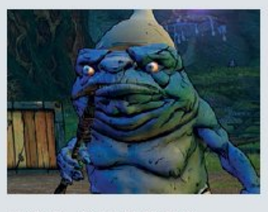
Meet your new targets



SKELETONS
We're all skeletons on the inside. Weak to cold, because they have no meat.



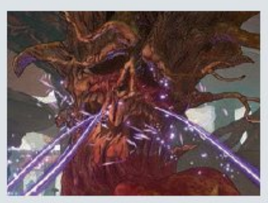
SKELETON ARCHERS
Give a skeleton a bow, and they think they're hot shit.



NOT SMURFS
I think they're called Yurfs or something. About as annoying as the real deal.

GOBLINS
Some of them aren't evil. I still hate their guts.

WYVERNS
I just learned how to pronounce their name. Thanks!



EVIL TREE
Made of evil wood. Perfect for making evil dining tables.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is better than *Borderlands 3*, but doesn't quite reach the heights of *Borderlands 2*.

70

FORGET IT, JAKE

Get ready to Google your own clues in CHINATOWN DETECTIVE AGENCY

By Alexis Ong

As a lover of sci-fi and a Singaporean, playing *Chinatown Detective Agency* was a rare experience. Not long after entering this near-future version of my home country, it became clear that this game has two layers, aimed at two audiences: one is a point-and-click adventure for folks who grew up with Broderbund's *Carmen Sandiego* series that took them all over the world. The other is a game made especially for Singaporeans.

In 2037, the country has gone through the unthinkable process of deregulation, there's anti-government graffiti on the train, droids are a routine sight, and there's only one human librarian left in the country. You play as Amira Darma, an ex-cop starting out as a private investigator. As she takes on cases and meets clients, Amira gets to travel the world while pulling at the threads of a much bigger mystery.

On the most basic level, it is really cool to explore your home city in pixels. This is something that the global North will never understand, and in this regard *CDA* evokes a very special kind of joy. In Western pop culture, Singapore's claims to fame are relatively recent, namely the last season of HBO's Westworld and Crazy Rich Asians, which was a film for Americans. I cannot understate how important it is that *CDA* features Singaporean voice acting, punctuated with snippets of Singlish and Malay.

Inconsistencies made for an occasionally frustrating playthrough

Overall, General Interactive Co pulls off a surface narrative that works for a general audience unfamiliar with Singaporean in-jokes, as well as more nuanced storytelling that taps into hyperlocal knowledge: Singaporean megachurch culture, class politics, and our precarious water supply. Most cases take you to different cities – Amira uses a travel program called HORUS to plan flights. Eventually she must choose a main client – I went with Tiger Lily, who runs a "health club" in the red-light district of Geylang. Her case involves a local megachurch and the dysfunctional family behind it.

The puzzles are probably the most divisive part of the game. *CDA*'s main thing is Googling clues yourself – there's a UI button to tab you out into a browser. Even as someone who loves ciphers, a couple of puzzles were overly tiresome. There's a fine line between giving the player a sense of satisfaction while still pushing them to break a little sweat, and here *CDA* wavers. Thankfully the game offers help, so it's really up to how much of a masochist you are.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click adventure set in Singapore.

DEVELOPER
General Interactive Co

PUBLISHER
HumbleGames/ WhisperGames

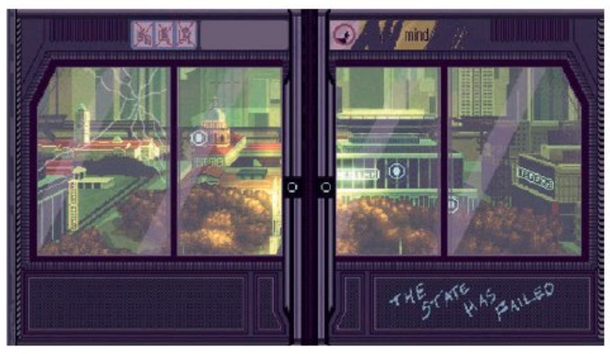
REVIEWED ON
Intel i7 11800H, RTX 3050 Ti, 16GB RAM

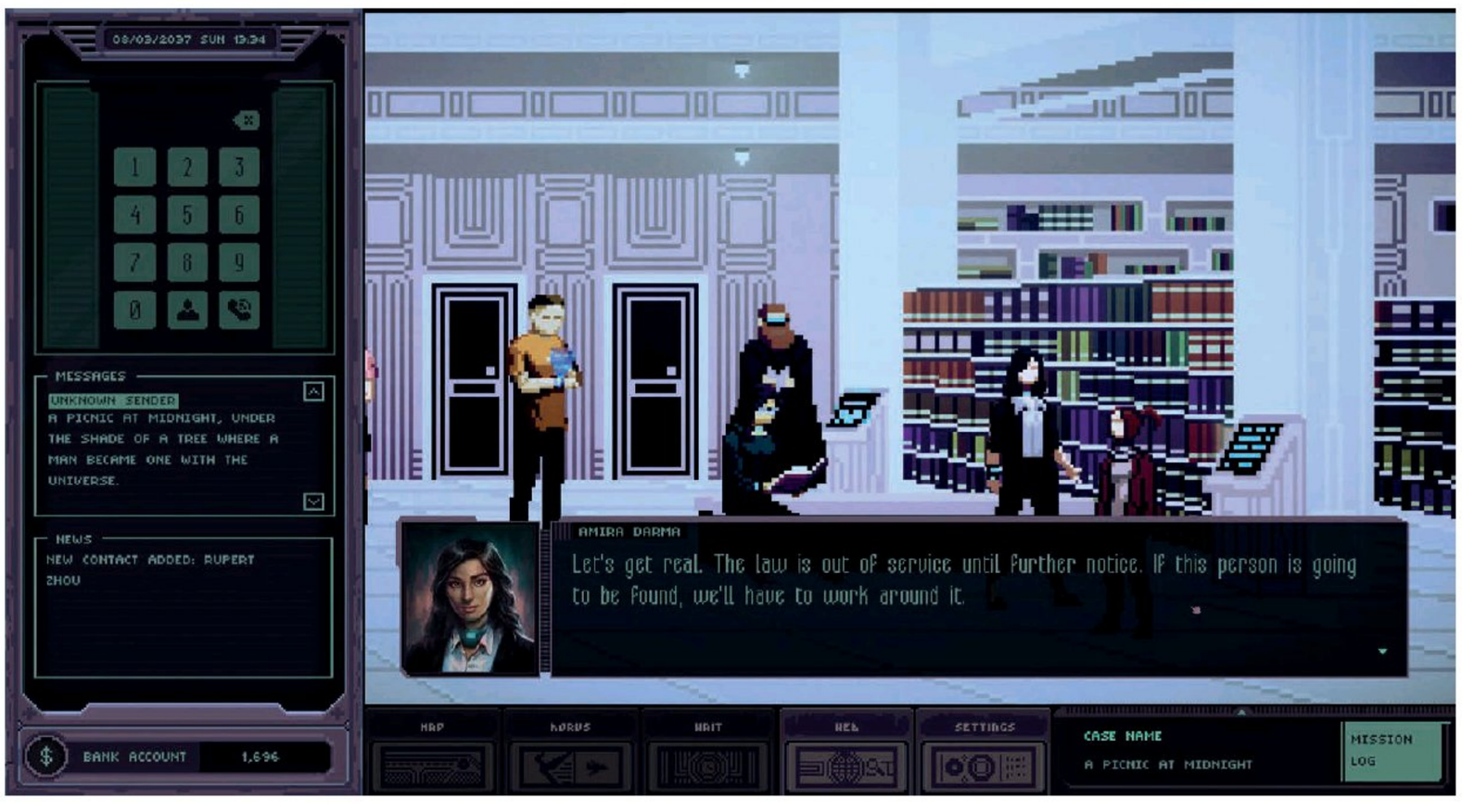
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
generalinteractive.co

COLD CASE

Small inconsistencies made for an occasionally frustrating playthrough. The initial part of the game auto-saves after each case. You're supposed to be able to save at your own discretion after you've chosen a main client, but this feature only worked for a short time. HORUS was a wasted opportunity to deepen in-game money management, as every flight costs a flat $550. Single arbitrary weeks pass between cases – I'm not sure why Amira would wait

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MESSAGES
UNKNOWN SENDER
A PICNIC AT MIDNIGHT, UNDER THE SHADE OF A TREE WHERE A MAN BECAME ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE.
NEWS
NEW CONTACT ADDED: RUPERT ZHOU
BANK ACCOUNT 1,696
AMIRA DARMA
Let's get real. The law is out of service until further notice. If this person is going to be found, we'll have to work around it.
MAP
HORUS
WAIT
NEWS
SETTINGS
CASE NAME
A PICNIC AT MIDNIGHT
MISSION LOG

ABOVE: A bird's eye view of New Delhi at night.

RIGHT: In the future, the law is on vacation.

a week before divulging a critical piece of information to a client.

The writing is a little uneven – the main cast is fairly well-characterised, but a few segments of heavy-handed exposition veer into overly theatrical territory. Most NPCs had one or two canned lines of dialogue that occasionally included mildly jarring non-sequiturs, but is consistent with the idiosyncratic nature of point-and-click adventures as extensions of the developers' personalities.

Even with these flaws, *CDA* is bound to be meaningful to a player like me, and reviewing it for a general audience is rather overwhelming. Because of the lack of my cultural representation in games – Southeast Asian indies are on the rise, though – *CDA* inadvertently takes on an unfair talismanic weight for Singaporeans who deserve better mainstream representations of their identity. Perhaps *CDA* was always going to be a loaded experience for me, though I could leave the generic main plot in favour of its depictions of local problems and culture. As far as point-and-click adventures go, it's a pretty good debut. As a cultural artefact, it's pretty great. ■

TOP: The game taps into ongoing discourse around labour rights.

RIGHT: No, you can't pet the dog in the Great Abode.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

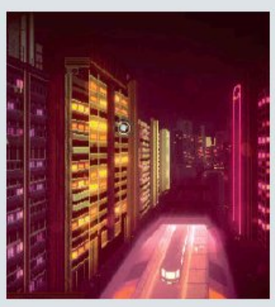
Chinatown Detective Agency **is a pretty solid detective adventure with a unique DIY approach to clue-solving.**

75

SINGAPORE TOUR

Experience pixelated recreations of the city's landmarks

THE BENJAMIN SHEARES BRIDGE
It's named after Singapore's second president, who died just before it opened.



BEDOK
Bedok once housed one of Singapore's most iconic cinemas, the Princess Theatre (now closed).

BUGIS
This area was once the heart of Singapore sex work and the drag community.

KALLANG
This area is home to Singapore's first civil airport, as well as multiple sports stadiums.

ARMENIAN CHURCH
This historical building was the first in the country to get electricity.

SWAMP THINGS

NORCO is a landmark moment for point-and-click adventures

By Alexis Ong

When people talk about *Norco*, they might mention its discerning use of science fiction, its punk roots, or how it resonates as a universal story about place and personhood. It's full of social commentary on capitalism in the real-life Louisianan town of the same name. But for all these lofty themes, it also nails something petty: the tiny weaknesses and hypocrisies of people looking for a place to belong.

Norco is the first game from the collective Geography of Robots, founded by writer/designer Yuts, who was born and raised in the town. The story follows Kay, a young woman who returns home to Norco to find her brother, Blake, in the wake of their mother's death. As something of a nomad, she's been running from her roots in a post-apocalyptic America marked by homegrown militias, gentrification, and fraying infrastructure. The player switches between Kay and her mother Catherine – not long before her death – as they get pulled into a surreal, tech-noir mystery. With its intense examinations of present-day problems, including a darkly funny look at the moving parts of the average gig economy job, *Norco* is at once somber and bitingly funny.

In the finest tradition of old-school point-and-click adventures, there aren't really any mechanics beyond a few minigames and small QTEs. The puzzles are simple enough by genre standards – if you've played enough point-and-clicks, it's really about how and what the dev is hiding on the screen – without diminishing the sense of satisfaction you get from solving them.

Playing *Norco* is a full-throated commitment to the story

SPECIAL KAY

Norco has a full-throated commitment to its story. To this end, each character in its ensemble cast has a well-formed persona – at least to the best extent that their allotted screen time allows. Every prickly drug dealer, partygoer, and Airbnb guest are scathing caricatures of the modern social scene, brought to life by Yuts' gift for dialogue. Private investigator Brett LeBlanc is a particular treasure, as well as Catherine's friend Keith – LeBlanc especially is a neat character study into the value of unexpected community ties and found family.

The mindmap system – a connect-the-dots-style web used to nudge the story along –mirrors both the player and Kay's need for clarity, with the added function of helping the player keep track of the game's major threads. On another level, the mindmap is an insightful alternative to point-and-clicks that rely on manipulating the game environment and collecting items – it forces the player to internalise and contextualise Kay and Catherine's decisions on a deeper level.

As you play, you come to realise *Norco*'s physical environment is already altered beyond repair, and the only thing left to do is find solidarity with the people who can survive. Perhaps because of the game's roots in the devs' lived experiences, it

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click narrative adventure with serious personality.

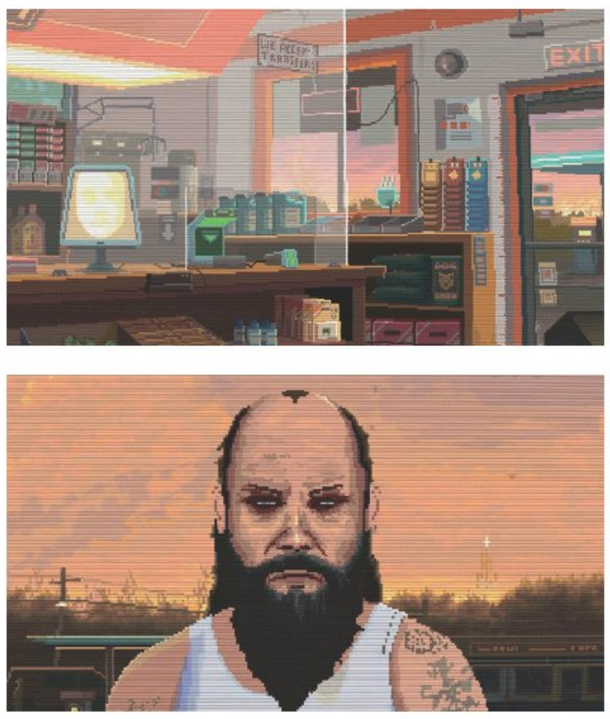
DEVELOPER
Geography of Robots

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

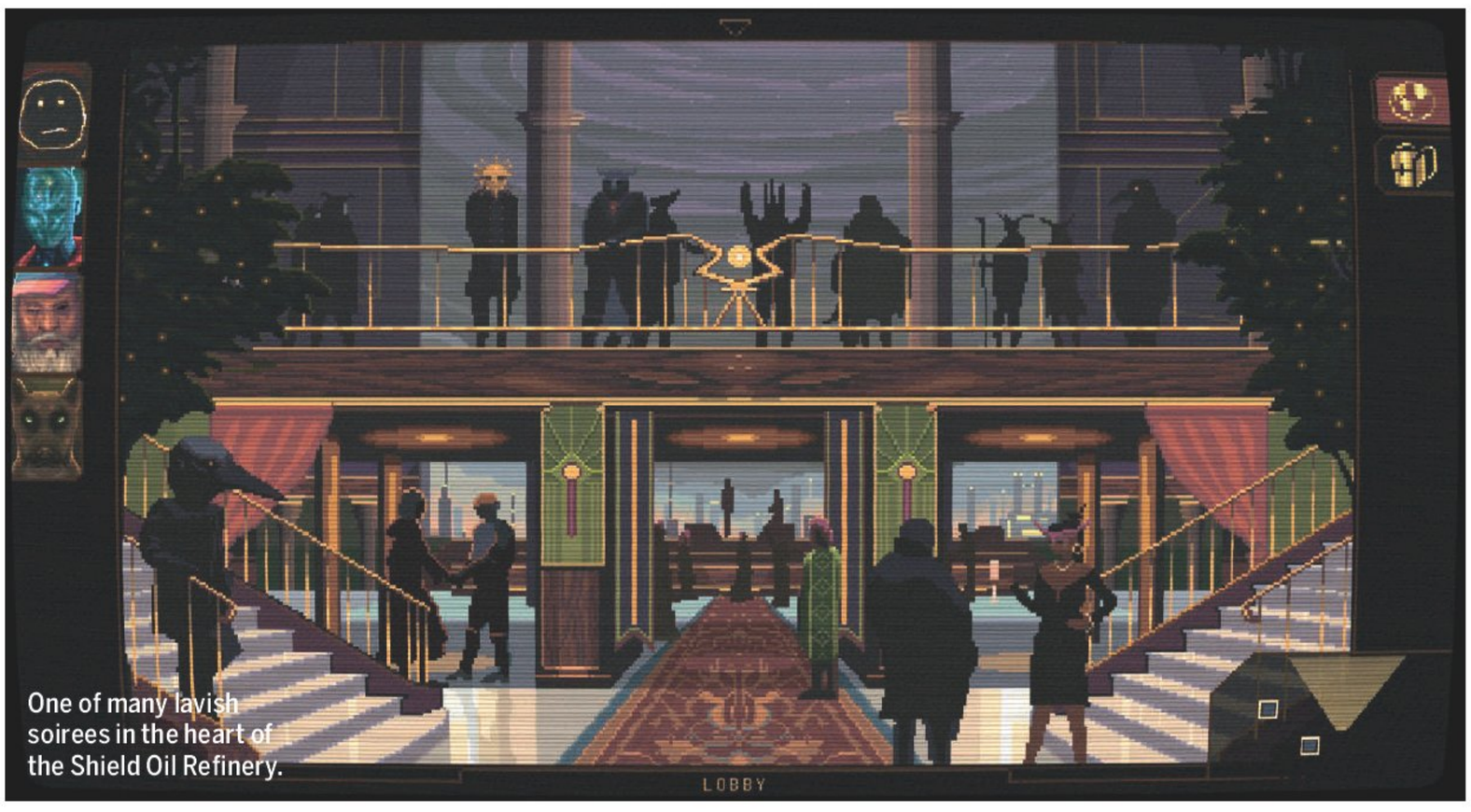
REVIEWED ON
GTX 980 Ti, Intel i5-4690K, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
norcogame.com



ABOVE: Every inhabitant of the town has their own story to be uncovered.



One of many lavish soirees in the heart of the Shield Oil Refinery.

TOP: New Orleans' most iconic tourist location: the French Quarter.

RIGHT: Hell hath no fury like disturbed Airbnb guests.

forces us to re-examine our relationship with videogames as a medium for escapist pleasure. This is where *Norco* offers a refreshing challenge within its chosen genre, forcing the player to pay attention to the problems of their own world without turning away.

Understanding the heart of *Norco* is very much realising that the real protagonists in the game are the Garretts – a cult of obnoxious boys who end up driving the final act of the game. They evolve from pernicious 'mall Nazis' to a group of degenerates who tried, in their own misguided way, to actualise a sense of self. There's a real depth to each Garrett subtype, elevated by Yuts' unparalleled ability to build empathy and connection between the most disparate social identities.

Norco is a bastion of evocative storytelling that invites any player to take refuge in its world. But, it cuts deep as a sobering, but loving portrait of a modern dystopia – a community on the edge of great change. There are few games in the world like *Norco*, and it belongs unequivocally in the highest tier of narrative experiences in the medium today. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A must for anyone interested in narrative-driven games – nuanced, fascinating, and full of personality.

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MEET THE GARRETTS

The development team invested a bit of themselves in these odd lads

SMILEY
A grotesque caricature of Yuts himself.

BEARDY
The hirsute Garrett was based on coder Aaron Gray.

GRUMPY
Anime-style barefoot Garrett has a touch of artist Jesse Jacobi.

THE OLD REPUBRICK

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA is a loving tribute to the films

By Ted Litchfield

I knew I was in for a good time with *Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga* when I began the Prequel Trilogy portion and saw Qui Gon Jinn and Obi Wan's ship get stopped at a traffic gate floating in space. After a quick video conference with the Trade Federation, which saw them hastily try and hide their evil plans labelled "evil plans", Qui Gon and Obi Wan breeze through the gate, accidentally knocking a hapless battle droid, sending it floating off into space.

The Skywalker Saga pushes its charm, with practically every cutscene featuring some visual gag or punchline at the film series' expense. Kylo Ren is pumping iron and flexing as Rey contacts him in that infamous scene from The Last Jedi. Ben Kenobi pops some popcorn before watching Leia's message to him in A New Hope. At the beginning of Revenge of the Sith, Lego Count Dooku makes a cheeky plastic pop noise as Anakin scissors his head off.

This ribald sense of humour reminds me of the classic Star Wars parody, Spaceballs, in the best way, and it really centres the experience. *Lego Star Wars* has been working its strange magic ever since 2005, and the series' keen sense of humour has often been able to elevate what might otherwise just be a soulless melding of two brands. *The Skywalker Saga* seeks to be the definitive entry, covering all the ground of previous games in the series, as well as including The Last Jedi and The Rise of Skywalker in Lego form for the first time. The result is a grab-bag of different gameplay styles all lent just enough depth to make them work, held together by that through-line of humour and charm.

There's an enormous amount of content on offer

There's an enormous amount of content on offer – though that does serve as a reminder of recent reports of crunch, bullying and high turnover of staff on the project at developer TT Games. The final product is full of joy, but the alleged human suffering behind it casts a pall over the game's release.

BUILD ME UP

As in previous *Lego* games, every character, vehicle, and interactable object in the game is constructed out of Lego, with a commitment to the destructibility and creativity inherent to the medium. You're often required to break down detritus and environment objects to produce the raw materials for puzzle solutions, and some playable droids can split in half to squeeze through tight spaces. The currency of the game is, as ever, 'studs', those tiny, one-peg pieces that always seem to find their way into couch cushions.

The actual terrain of the world and most buildings have always been realistic rather than made out of Lego in the series, and here in *The Skywalker Saga* the ludicrously detailed environments add another layer to the presentation. The underwater city of the Gungans on Naboo or Star Destroyer graveyard on Jakku look like they could be maps from a lost *Battlefront* game. Instead they're inhabited by cute little Lego versions of iconic Star Wars characters. It has a similar effect to Mario exploring New Donk City in *Mario Odyssey*, a wonderfully absurd combination of cartoonish characters with an authentic world.

The charm of the setting also extends to the voice acting, a feature I wasn't sold on before starting *The Skywalker Saga*. Back in the hazy prehistoric mists of the mid 2000s, I played a *Lego Star Wars* full of charismatic mimes pantomiming the events of the series, and change is a hard thing to deal with. Thankfully, *The Skywalker Saga* sells the dialogue with incredible voice acting talent.

Not only is there a stellar cast of veteran voice actors, including old hands reprising their roles from The Clone Wars and other spin-offs, but several actors from the films return too. Brian Blessed as Boss Nass, Anthony Daniels as C3-PO, and even Billy Dee Williams as Lando are all a joy to hear here.

YODA MAY CRY

Mechanically, *The Skywalker Saga* is a jack-of-all-trades, mixing multiple genres over the course of its nine

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A parodius Lego adaptation of all nine Star Wars movies with PS2-era gameplay sensibilities.

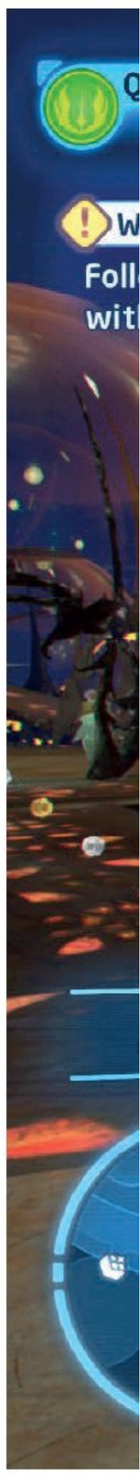
DEVELOPER
TT Games

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 12600K, RTX 3070, 32 gig DDR5

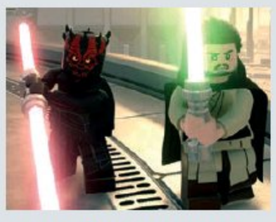
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3xfvYj4



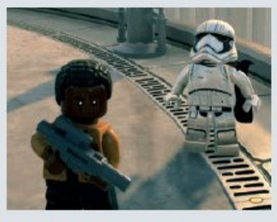
CLASS WARFARE

The cast is sorted into archetypes, dictating their attacks and abilities



JEDI/DARK SIDE
Lightsaber combos and Force push. Say what you want about the space western stuff, but this is what people show up for.

SCOUNDREL/ BOUNTY HUNTER
The space western stuff in Star Wars – this is what I show up for. Ranged attacks and bonus cash.



HERO/VILLAIN
Our non Force-powered protagonist types. Useful in any situation, and also able to hack certain special consoles.

SCAVENGER
A unique class with the ability to craft puzzle-solving implements like a barrier-busting cannon.

ASTROMECH/ PROTOCOL DROID
Astromechs are needed to get past locks, and Protocol Droids can translate alien languages.

The ‘code breaker’ lugs around a lego dismantling tool.

LEFT: A wretched hive of hobbyist plastic construction.

BELOW: Apparently Qui-Gon Jinn doesn’t even drink gin. Misleading.

RIGHT: The streets of Theed look like something out of a fantasy RPG.

FAR RIGHT: The game gets a good riff over the infamous 'who shot first?' debate.

BELOW: I thought *Star Wars: 1313* got cancelled?

Obi-Wan Kenobi (Episode II - Robe)
235,415
Missing Pieces
Enquire about the dart at Dex's Diner in Coruscant's Uscru District.
Uscru District
Entertainment District

condensed movie campaigns and bevy of side content. *The Skywalker Saga* is most often a 3D brawler, with very easy encounters disguising a surprisingly deep melee combat system. With either lightsabers or fists you can launch opponents into the air and combo them into oblivion, divekicking and countering like Dante from *Devil May Cry*. Most enemies go down a little too quick to pull off anything crazy, but *The Skywalker Saga*'s many boss fights offer more opportunities for flashy stunt work.

Unfortunately, those same boss fights are a bit padded for my taste. I don't mind General Grievous' multiple health bars so much as the fact that we have to take a break in between each one, with him running off in a cutscene followed by some mandatory battle droid clearing and light platforming and puzzling. It really kills my Duel of the Fates buzz, and it's a shame because otherwise those fights are where the combat actually starts to come alive for me.

Jedi characters also have access to a Force throw ability to pick up and toss objects and enemies, while non-Force powered characters possess rudimentary third-person shooting mechanics with their blasters. All of these options leave you with an oddly deep toolbox for how easy the challenges are. The game provides a stress-free sandbox with room to experiment at your leisure, but I wasn't taken with its combat, and *The Skywalker Saga*'s more drawn-out fights left me bored.

Outside the usual brawling, *The Skywalker Saga* also features some extensive space and aerial combat. I find the dogfighting to be a bit more engaging than battling on the ground. The challenges are still fairly straightforward, but being able to fly around and explore space made up for it. I'm especially fond of how *The Skywalker Saga* lets you tool around in planets' orbits between missions, shooting down meteors and ferreting out sidequests. As with the planetside environments, TT Games swings for the fences with its hi-fi space backdrops: the dogfighting takes place over some phenomenal skyboxes of Star Wars' colourful planetary systems.

The myriad planetside areas can be revisited at will following completion of their story missions, and they contain various puzzles, sidequests and minigames, some of which can only be approached post-game when the correct character has been unlocked. You're limited to canonical cast members during story missions, but free-play lets you select from dozens of major and minor unlockable Star Wars characters. This ties into a key long-term timesink of *The Skywalker Saga* – Kyber Bricks, this game's main collectible. There's over 1,100 hidden throughout the game, and I discovered only a little over a tenth of them in my playthrough. In a series first, they also tie into a light progression system. You can invest them into upgrades across all playable characters, or small bonuses to individual archetypes like Jedi, Hero, or Bounty Hunter. Many of the more hidden Kyber Bricks reminded me of the creative Moon placement from *Mario Odyssey*, and I could see sufficiently motivated *Lego Star Wars*-heads investing the time necessary to find them all.

Provides a stress-free sandbox with room to experiment

PHONE A FRIEND

The *Lego Star Wars* series has been defined by its commitment to drop-in couch co-op, and *The Skywalker Saga* is no different in this regard. With a second input method and the press of a button, a player two can take control of one of your secondary characters. This is perfect for laptop play in a dorm, or maybe if you're one of those new millennium dad types with a media centre PC, but it's not a great fit for desktop play, and *The Skywalker Saga* cries out for online co-op. TT Games hasn't implemented any online play system of its own, but there is Steam Remote Play to fill the gap. I'd never used the feature before, but it didn't take too much wrangling to get a friend of mine halfway across the country controlling Han Solo to my Obi Wan in A New Hope, all without him owning a copy of the game to boot. Unfortunately, this proved a bit too demanding an ask for one or both of our shaky internet connections, and my ISP proved the greatest opponent of fun in a galaxy far, far away. I lost my friend and had to invite him back three times over the course of an hour of play. As it stands, you'll need pretty reliable internet on one or both ends to enjoy online co-op in this game – and need to own the game on Steam rather than Epic.

The Skywalker Saga is not a particularly demanding game, and I was able to maintain a near-locked 144fps at 1440p with an RTX 3070, but the graphics menu is relatively sparse. I didn't have any significant graphical glitches or performance hiccups aside from the game resetting its refresh rate back to 60hz every time I quit and came back. What it lacks in graphics options, *The Skywalker Saga* makes up for with an impressive accessibility menu. I appreciated the multiple sizes of subtitles, different settings for health regen/static hp pickups, and making QTEs easier or even doing away with them altogether.

The Skywalker Saga is an impressive package, successfully adapting some of the most iconic sci-fi movies of all time with equal amounts playful mockery of and loving adherence to the source material. The only shame is that its sense of lively fun stands so in contrast to stories of the game's development, mismanagement allegedly laying undue stress and suffering on the people who made this whimsical journey possible. We can only hope that the developer's next project is delivered under much better circumstances. ■

PLANETSIDE

The Skywalker Saga *features a galaxy map with dozens of iconic locales*

CORUSCANT
It may be ecologically unfeasible, but this planet is just so cool. Coruscant offers sci-fi vistas and a bit of fun waiting tables at Dexter's Diner.

TATOOINE
Classic for a reason, *The Skywalker Saga* really does justice to the Tunisian mud brick architecture used as the basis of Tatooine's towns and bazaars.

NABOO
I was impressed by *The Skywalker Saga*'s rendition of the underwater Gungan city, but its take on the capital Theed is something to behold.

KAMINO
All property is beachfront property, the interiors look like an Apple store, and it's populated entirely by aliens and Temuera Morrisons. A paradise in space.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The Skywalker Saga's competent gameplay is elevated by its infectious and utterly charming sense of humour.

77

Pigmen are pitiable creatures, Frankensteined from pig and human parts.

RIGHT: Your followers are invisible during stealth, which feels like a cop-out.

FAR RIGHT: Throughout the game, you're taunted by mysterious ancient beings.

after all. This body suits you.
Mysterious Girl: You're on the hunt, I understand? Tracks to find your missing sweetheart? I can show you where they are...
Mysterious Girl: Don't let the trail get cold. I don't want to suffer through this any longer than I have to.
Jane Bell (YOU)
(Ask why she's suffering)
(Ask why she's calling you "the Passeng...
(Ask what she meant by "this body")
(The tracks)

Even in daylight, there's a gloomy vignette filter you can't turn off.

WEIRD, WEIRD WEST

Top-down immersive sim **WEIRD WEST** offers a fistful of supernatural horror

By Tom Sykes

I've lived many lives as I've travelled around in *Weird West*. Bounty hunter, werewolf, pigman – that was a memorable one. And in every body I made the West a little better, or a little worse. As much as it's a game about constant micro decision-making – stealth or direct assault, Molotov cocktail plus oil barrel or revolver plus John Woo slow-mo dive – *Weird West* is just as concerned with the bigger picture as other immersive sims, including *Dishonored* and *Prey*.

That bigger picture begins in a familiar place: with a bounty hunter coming out of retirement. For the first few hours, I was tangling with outlaws in typical Wild West fashion and wondering where the weirdness was. You buy supplies in towns and pick up bounties before heading out, traversing an open world map stuffed with abandoned mines and isolated homesteads. More often than not, these locations are filled with enemies you can either sneak past or fill with lead, via fast-paced combat.

Stealth is typically my preferred approach, but here I used it as an opening salvo, as a prelude to the inevitable massacre when it all went wrong. That's partly because the fiction encourages it, and partly because of the murky visual style, which sacrifices readability for a grungy comic book aesthetic. I was forever zooming in, to better make out the characters, and zooming out for an overview, and generally getting myself spotted in the process.

When fighting does break out, it's refreshingly quick and replete with supernatural abilities. However, between that dingy visual style, and a complex twin-stick control scheme, I never found it all that enjoyable.

THIS LITTLE PIGGY...

Things pick up for the second story in the anthology, which puts you in the trotters of an unholy pigman mash-up who leaves his swamp to enact revenge upon a witch. All that promised weirdness comes out in a flood, as you chat with a sentient, foul-mouthed tree and battle witches in ancient, subterranean temples.

Structurally, the five stories are similar, playing out as miniature CRPGs complete with sidequests and companions. You can even recruit the protagonists of the previous stories, each of whom has been marked by a mystical brand. These are stories with memorable characters including Pigman Joe, cursed so he can only communicate in rhyme.

You can even recruit the protagonists of the previous stories

While each new chapter is a fresh start of sorts, certain elements persist, from the overarching story to the outcomes of major decisions and more minor actions.

To give an example – and it's a spoiler for the second chapter – you can choose to leave your fellow pigmen as soulless husks, or return their missing souls to their bodies. Pick option B and they'll go out into society, turning up in subsequent chapters as NPCs. Not every decision is as meaningful, but you do feel like you're having an impact on the world.

You can also turn settlements into ghost towns by wiping out their inhabitants. And that's not a part of the storyline, just something you can do if you want to. Kill everyone in the town of Grackle and the place will become abandoned. Bandits might even have moved in, next time you visit. Similarly, clear out a bandit-occupied town and its former residents may eventually return to their own homes.

In truth, you'll hardly miss one town if it falls to ruin, but the possibility is exciting – the thought that almost *anyone* can be killed, and the game will roll with it. I tested this at one point, when a story ally attacked me in a scripted event. I died several times trying to win the ensuing battle – until I reloaded an earlier save and killed the ally before she could turn on me. The ambush still happened, but my attackers were now a woman short and easily beaten.

I'm sure there will be better examples once *Weird West* is out in the wild, and I keenly await those more creative anecdotes. The game's conclusion takes it all into account, so be mindful of the people you kill, and all the decisions you make. Far more than a lot of games with branching stories and morality systems, *Weird West* is watching everything you do. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A top-down immersive sim set in the Weird West – a Wild West full of supernatural monsters

DEVELOPER
WolfEye Studios

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

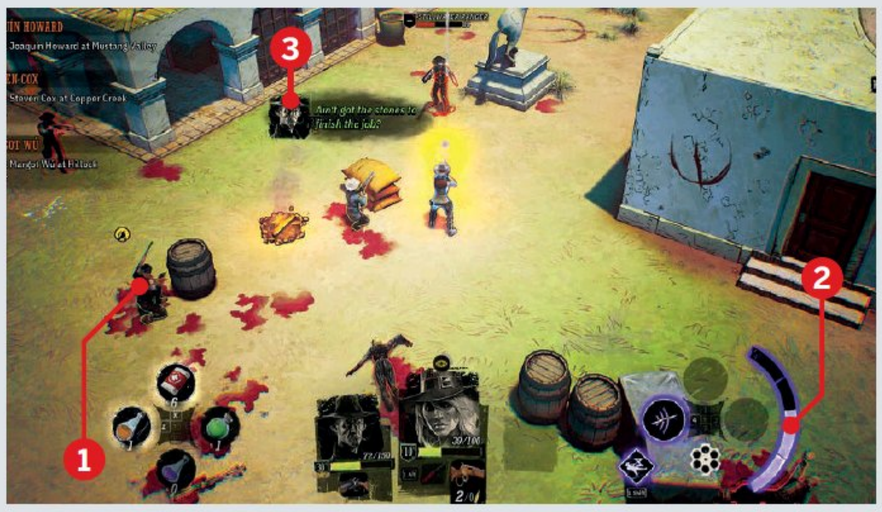
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
weirdwest.com

WESTWORLD

A snapshot of* Weird West's *hectic combat



1 BFF
Characters helped out in sidequests can become Friends for Life, meaning they'll appear randomly in battle. It's a lovely gesture, and you feel bad when they die.

2 POWER CURVE
Abilities are a mix of gun powers and character-specific supernatural powers, all of which are bought using Nimp Relics, found through exploration.

3 FOLLOWING THE LEADER
You can hire mercenaries in saloons, or recruit the former protagonists, who will bring their inventories across with them.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Look past the murky aesthetic and clunky combat: this is an exciting fusion of sim and CRPG.

79

CHAOS THEORY

Oddity reigns in STRANGER OF PARADISE: FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN

By Anne-Marie Coyle

The mere existence of *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin* is, well, strange. When Square Enix announced it was remaking *Final Fantasy VII*, it made sense. It was, after all, the game that put the world's most ironically named series on the map. An action spin-off inspired by and serving as sort-of-prequel to the now 35 year old and largely forgotten first game in the franchise, however, is an odd choice. The resulting game is even odder.

Stranger of Paradise offers a new take on the bare-bones narrative of its pixelated predecessor, with developer Team Ninja injecting the series with a more edgy tone. At least that's what it was going for, but cringe-worthy dialogue from over-the-top characters sees the game sail right by the realm of cool and land squarely in a field of cheese. Each of the game's characters can be summed up with one adjective. There's the spritely Jed, the stern Ash, the wistful Neon and Jack, who can only be described as driven, and driven by only one desire: to kill Chaos. For all its absurdity, the story is entertaining, with each level bookended by short snappy cutscenes that never feel like they intrude upon the action.

While it's more forgiving than *Nioh*, *Stranger of Paradise* does have more in common with the samurai-inspired Soulslike than *Final Fantasy*. Foes are thrown at you thick and fast, and being able to switch between classes and swap in and out abilities makes for encounters that are robust and gratifying. Battles are given extra depth thanks to Soul Shield, an alternative method to regular blocking that reduces an enemy's Break Gauge. Fully depleting this gauge allows you to swoop in with Soul Burst, a showy finisher that sees enemies turn to crystal before spectacularly shattering into tiny pieces. It's both slick and undeniably satisfying. You can also temporarily absorb certain skills with Soul Shield to use back against your enemies. Turning a Cactuar's deadly 1,000 Needles attack against the bouncy menace elicits a feeling of sheer delight if you're a *Final Fantasy* fan who's long been on the receiving end of this spiky signature move.

Enemies turn to crystal before spectacularly shattering

As solid as *Stranger of Paradise*'s combat is, it's not without its shortcomings. Magic doesn't transition to the game's fast-paced combat quite as well as melee. You also only have the option to switch between two job classes on the fly. It's a curious limitation that's at odds with the freedom the game otherwise offers.

One element that could do with dialling down the variety is the game's loot system. Drops are so frequent that they become meaningless. Another case of too much comes from the constant chatter between teammates. Hearing your party question what could be in a chest every time you come across one quickly leaves you wishing your next lofty treasure haul would include some silencing potions.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Soulslike *Final Fantasy* from the developer of *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*

DEVELOPER
Team Ninja

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-11700K, GeForce RTX 3070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3v4I37X

JACK ATTACK

The difficulty settings make it pleasingly accessible. The standard 'Action' setting provides a considerable challenge that perfectly bridges the gap between mindless victories and frustrating repetition.

Locations, lovingly inspired by previous *Final Fantasy* titles, look nice, but it can be hard to see anything in the more shadowy sections. The game runs smoothly at 60fps but grinds to a snail's pace when cranked up to 120fps, particularly when you're performing an enemy shattering Soul Burst.

While it's not without its issues, *Stranger of Paradise* is a stylish and charmingly ridiculous adventure. The combat, environments make for a *Final Fantasy* title that shines despite its darker style. But while it offers one of the most dynamic combat systems the series has seen, its sketchy story and half-baked cast also make it one of the shallowest additions. This B-movie take on the series is rough around the edges, but nonetheless an enjoyable and fascinating reimagining of the aged escapade that started it all. ■

RECRUITMENT SPECIALIST

Some choice pickings from the Job system

SWORDSMAN
The spinning slash can hit multiple enemies, making it a solid choice for those starting out.

MARAUDER
Marauders deal heavy damage using axes. The Upheaval ability unleashes a crushing strike.

LANCER
This class can fight from a safe distance, throwing lances to effectively whittle down enemies.

KNIGHT
These holy warriors can fight using Blessing of Light, which sends out a shockwave of light.

WHITE MAGE
Offers assistance by healing allies, summoning protective barriers, and reviving friends.

BERSERKER
The Berserk ability allows Berserkers to increase their attack power and stagger their enemies.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Team Ninja serves up some solid Soulslike combat with a generous helping of cheese in *Stranger of Paradise*.

72

This foe has a lot of heads, and none look happy to see you.

They always look like they're about to drop the year's hottest mixtape.

ABOVE LEFT: Soul Burst slays foes quickly and makes you briefly invulnerable.

LEFT: And so, their journey begins...

BELOW LEFT: Multiplayer allows you to swap AI teammates for real-life ones.

Physical attacks are ineffective against Flans. Magic works best.

A FAMILIAR RING

ELDEN RING is a Souls-like adventure on a massive scale

By Tyler Colp

FromSoftware's games, from *Demon's Souls* to *Dark Souls* to *Bloodborne*, have always quietly been open worlds. Far off castles and swamps caught your eye, you trekked towards them, fell down a hole, probably died and went looking for a new destination. They didn't need maps or icons, because their carefully crafted settings were dense with clues and lures leading to new paths and back to old locations.

Elden Ring, FromSoftware's successor to the *Souls* series, spreads the mysteries and challenges of *Dark Souls* across an open world in a more conventional sense. There are castles to infiltrate from several angles, swamps to ride through on horseback, and gargantuan beasts to chase you down. The sheer amount of freedom is a first for the series, and it results in a game packed with what's so beloved about it: idiosyncratic characters and buckets of truly horrifying monsters.

Elden Ring is bursting with familiar iconography from the *Souls* series. Not only is there a woman to level you up and a throne to usurp, there are many enemies that reference or even look and move exactly the same as ones that came before. It's distracting, and illustrates how scattering the things I love across a new world doesn't necessarily improve them.

It's bursting with familiar iconography from the *Souls* series

Even as a reprisal of what's been done before, *Elden Ring* manages to remix enough of these elements to construct a game that, like the *Souls* series, is still unparalleled. *Elden Ring* is undeniably *Dark Souls* even if I had hoped for a little more. And while that comes with some annoying and frustrating technical problems too, it also means that it's tremendous without having to reach for anything more. And the few times it does, it soars.

SOLID FOOTING

Elden Ring's first few hours might remind you of gentler times in a game like *Breath of the Wild*, but no, FromSoftware has not abandoned its traditional brutality. Because of the open world, there are opportunities to circumvent some of the third-person, hack-and-slash fights that would eviscerate you in another *Souls* game, but it's still difficult – for me, one of the most difficult FromSoftware games.

Elden Ring features the same deliberate combat that's now iconic for these types of games, except here it's fully refined. You swing, the enemy swings, and both of you can interrupt each other's attacks with acute timing. This is upended by the new weapon abilities and magic spells that introduce things like shields that deflect magic or swords that cast massive bursts of flame. The best *Elden Ring* fights, like the best *Souls* fights, ask that you study the way an enemy lunges at you and look for openings to punish them when they miss. In action, it's almost turn-based as you make your move and wait for the enemy to make theirs. *Elden Ring* is filled with encounters like this. Most of them are superb, but later in the game, some enemies and bosses come with so much health that it can be gruelling to get them down.

Elden Ring remained hostile for the 60 hours I've put into it, making the trek through it occasionally frustrating and directionless. One pocket of land might house undead soldiers who fall to pieces with a poof of magic, while another one might contain ruthless giants who can shrug off an axe cleaved into their side. I spent much of *Elden Ring* unsure of how strong my character was and where I could go. It makes sense from my character's perspective – she's intruding on the land that exiled her – but for me, inscrutable encounters with high-health enemies felt like hitting an MMO level gate, except that because this is a *Souls* game, I couldn't tell whether I was expected to spend hours mastering these fights or leave them until later.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world action-RPG set in a vast, sad fantasy world

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080, Ryzen 9 3900X, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
eldenring.com

ITEMISED LIST

Essential gear you should grab ASAP

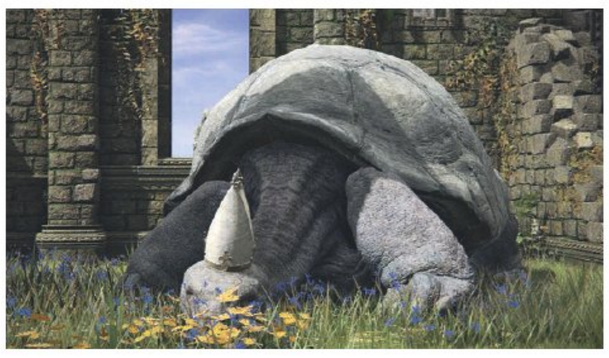
CRAFTING KIT
Purchased from the merchant at the Church of Elleh. This let you craft arrows, bombs, poison cures, and much more.

WHETSTONE KNIFE
Located in Gatefront Ruins. Lets you apply Ashes of War – new weapon powers – at any Site of Grace.

SPIRIT CALLING BELL
Gifted by a witch early in the game at the Church of Elleh. It lets you summon ghostly buddies.

FLASK OF PHYSICK
Found in the Third Church of Marika in eastern Limgrave. Lets you brew custom potions.

Bosses are the usual mix of noble, grotesque, and sad.



FAR LEFT: I sure hope this nice lady doesn't turn out to be a hard as nails boss fight!

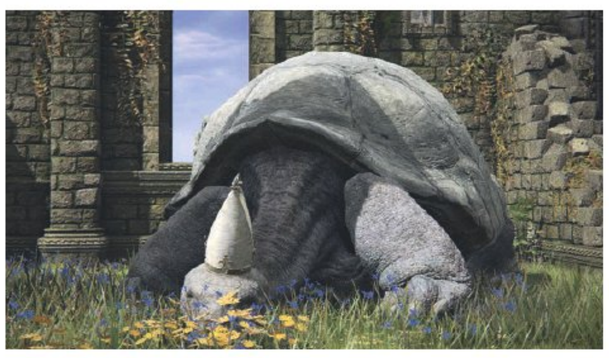
LEFT: Poison swamps are back.

See that castle? You can go to it.

Melina joins you on your journey in the Lands Between.

RIGHT: A friendly turtle in a pope hat that teaches magic.

FAR RIGHT: Not quite a red wedding, but there is a lot of blood around here.



There are snakes as big as dragons.

Torrent, the horse you can summon at almost any time while outside of *Elden Ring*'s delineated dungeons and caves, is part of the problem, too. It's exhilarating to gallop past massive enemies and through camps to pick up items, but sometimes the horse is required for large-scale fights against dragons and big monsters. For weaker enemies in the open world, it works fine, but certain scenarios can lead to confusion as you get pelted by unavoidable arrows and magic. Some enemies might seem like they're designed to be fought on the horse, but are much more manageable on foot, which feels antithetical to having Torrent in the first place.

It's exhilarating to gallop past massive enemies and through camps

A PATH NEW AND OLD

Once you understand the language of *Dark Souls*, it's clear where you should head next in its more contained world and where you shouldn't. A poison-soaked area might drain your healing resources on an initial run, but a forest nearby is full of herbs to stock up on. *Elden Ring*'s problems often have similar solutions, but because the map is so big and dense, it was hours before I understood where I was supposed to use items like anti-poison herbs and armour built to withstand magic attacks that I found.

Ruts like that are worth climbing out of to see *Elden Ring*'s most tremendous moments. In its early hours, *Dark Souls* appears to be a typical fantasy setting with skeletons and dragons, but it eventually unfolds into an hourglass world where golden cities gaze down upon flooded ruins. When *Elden Ring* isn't recreating these locations, including that very same city down to the windows, or the poison swamp, or its own vacant version of the hub area, it's utterly magnetic.

Below the Lands Between lies one of the most beautiful areas in FromSoftware's oeuvre, rivalling the sakura-hues of *Sekiro*'s final act. That's where I fought the Ancestor Spirit, a graceful, magical stag pulled from Norse mythology. In contrast to *Elden Ring*'s grotesque dragons and stoic knights, the Ancestor Spirit is otherworldly as it weightlessly glides through the air. The fight is backed by a sparse score that drives the slow pace of the fight to give you the space to soak it up. FromSoftware games are known for difficulty, but one of the developer's greatest tricks is turning the tension on its head with a fight that's almost purely thematic, with just enough to do to keep you present. The Ancestor Spirit is like being deep into a rhythm game where the buttons melt away under your fingertips and the music alone carries you to the end. It's nigh-transcendent, and an example of how hard *Elden Ring*'s best moments hit, when the iconography of the previous games disappears and FromSoftware's skill at orchestrating these types of battles shines through.

The reheated boss fights from the previous games undercut the impact. Although many of them are remixed and situated in different contexts, they are all blatant nods to what came before. I fought a spinning wolf with a sword in its mouth like *Dark Souls*' Sif, I duelled a knight with the same gait as Artorias, and I barrelled through a library of minions to disrupt a floating boss that resembles Fool's Idol from *Demon's Souls*. *Dark Souls 2* and *3* were full of references to the previous games, but neither of them promised to be a whole new universe birthed in part from the mind of a famous fantasy author.

Elden Ring could have been anything, and yet, for an absurd amount of its length, it's disappointingly interested in reprising the *Souls* games, even if doing so puts it above so many other action RPGs.

WAITING FOR MORE

Elden Ring carries forward a lot of the things you'd expect, including rough performance on PC. Over time, it tends to intermittently stutter and slow down for brief moments, especially as you're out in the open world. I never died to a hiccup in performance, but it made me pause and restart the game fairly often to fix the issue. The day-one patch which promised to fix the issue, didn't solve it completely either. There's a 60fps lock, high RAM requirement, and limited graphics settings (you won't find DLSS or granular options for anti-aliasing). I hoped for better options and performance from a developer that's released several games on PC at this point.

Like with *Dark Souls*, though, *Elden Ring*'s technical flaws are worth putting up with and will hopefully clear up with time, either by a modder or an official patch. Every stutter is worth the idiomatic dream logic of finding a swirling portal that takes you to a hunched over beast man that begs you to feed him. FromSoftware creates transfixing fantasy worlds that leave you desperately wanting to know more about them. No other developer does it the same way, especially at this scale.

Elden Ring is junk food for FromSoftware fans. It's more of what I already adore, but family sized. It has everything that makes these games so intoxicating, and that lodges their intricate fiction into my brain. But its devotion to what came before is distracting. It dulls the impact of those moments where *Elden Ring* leaps beyond its past to demonstrate why FromSoftware's games are unparalleled by all who attempt to replicate them. As another *Souls* game, I love *Elden Ring*, but as the latest game from FromSoftware, I wanted it to dream a little bigger. ■

SOUL SURVIVORS

Some of the weirder characters you'll meet

PRAWN GUY
He stole a necklace, but lets you buy it back. He boils prawns and sells them. An unhappy fellow.

RANNI THE WITCH
A witch that has plans for you. Though gentle, she doesn't seem like she's telling you the full truth.

WAR COUNSELOR IJI
Kind giant with a peculiar helmet. He's the only trustworthy NPC in the game; protect him!

KENNETH
Kenneth is a noble sort that asks for a favour. He appears innocent, but I don't believe him.

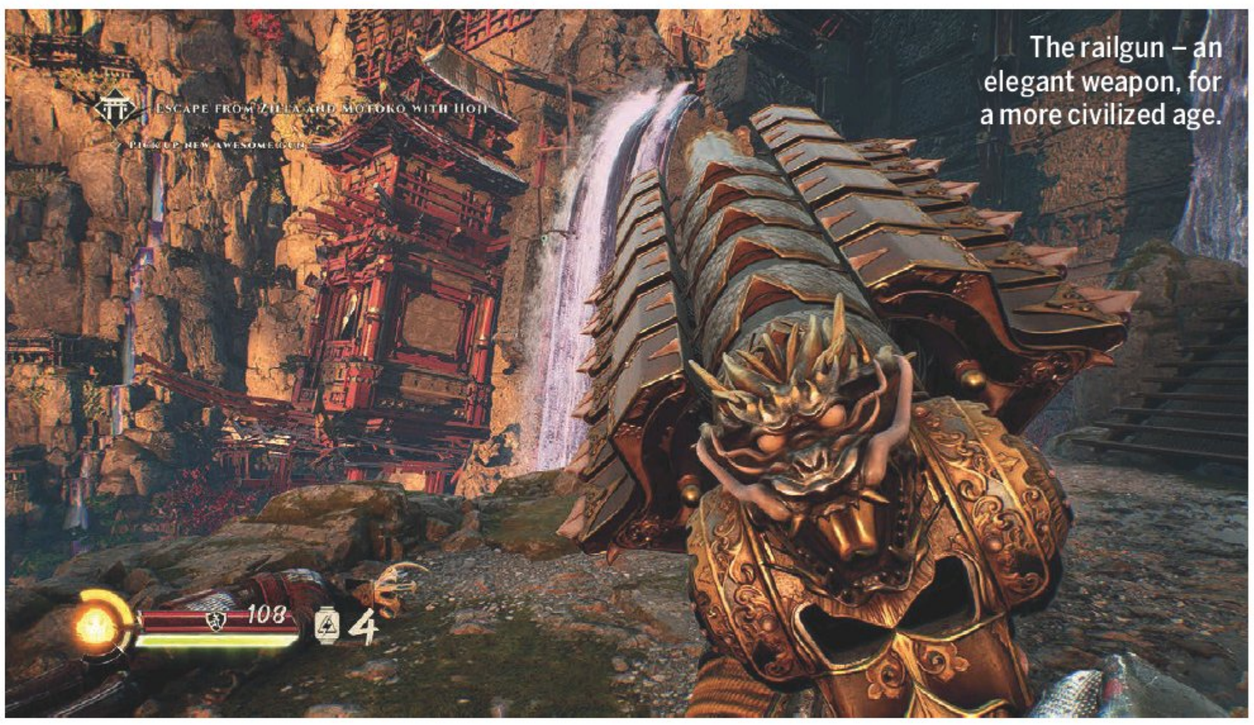
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Elden Ring **is a world of tremendous secrets and battles – but I wish it was a little less familiar for a *Souls* fan.**

90

RIGHT: Environmental hazards can be turned against Wang's foes.

BELOW: Surprisingly, this actually is just a flesh wound.



The railgun – an elegant weapon, for a more civilized age.

LO WANG-ING FRUIT

Boomer shooter **SHADOW WARRIOR 3** revives a hero we never needed

By Lincoln Carpenter

Shadow Warrior 3 is a fast-paced FPS for adult-aged children. It stars East Asian caricature and human dick joke Lo Wang, whose main character trait is that he sucks. He's an onslaught of crap one-liners and innuendos, the kind of man who's rating how bangable the game's only woman is within moments of meeting her. He's the answer to a question nobody asked: what if Deadpool was racially insensitive, and you had to be him for many hours?

While the legacy of the original 1997 game is better left forgotten, I'd like plenty about *Shadow Warrior 3*'s throwback shooter rhythm if it was anywhere else. Its singleplayer campaign of combat arenas is a perpetual parkour of air dashing and wall-running, all while rotating through different flavours of carnage as each weapon's dwindling ammo count allows.

The arsenal ranges from standards like a truly satisfying shotgun to more unconventional implements, like a shuriken-shooting crossbow. A quick-recharging chi blast and a retractable grappling hook help provide space when it's needed. For ammo and health, enemies themselves are the most reliable refill options: melee attacks from Lo Wang's katana generate ammo on hits and kills, while a finisher meter enables executions for a health refill and a bonus effect unique to each enemy type. Lots of notes taken from 2016's *Doom* here.

Those finishers provide an extra strategic layer: the most basic enemies will grant quick bonuses like temporary increases to max health. Larger enemies will instead provide a 'gore tool': a disposable, high-damage weapon refashioned from the yokai's corpse, like a hammer torn from an oni's meaty lower spine. It produces some enjoyable tension – cashing in for a gore tool means being briefly unable to grab a health refill. It's a fun balance to find, while it lasts.

Hours in, the momentum crumbles. Character and weapon upgrades increase HP and ammo drops, flattening the rhythm of in-combat decision making. And *Shadow Warrior 3* doesn't have any ideas for ramping up difficulty beyond throwing out ever higher numbers of its beefy demons. Every combat encounter becomes a bloated slog of bullet sponge enemies.

Every combat encounter becomes a slog of bullet sponge enemies

QUIPPED APART

Of course, by this point, Lo Wang has spent hours making the experience intolerable. Any small success is punished by having to hear Lo Wang's god-awful banter. Every victory carries a danger of triggering Wang-based innuendo. Every kill is a chance to hear him sing Another One Bites the Dust, except it's funny because he says douchebag in it.

He's a cheap caricature – dulled down by a reboot since his first incarnation in the original 1997 Shadow Warrior, but still unavoidably a Western imagining of a funny Asian man as an excuse for dick jokes and an incredibly silly accent.

At the very least, for the first time, his accent isn't being performed by a white man. It's not much of a victory, though, when the soundtrack is a Frankenstein's monster of Asian musical stereotypes, sampling that one kung fu fighting riff and ending each combat encounter with a goofy-ass gong hit.

Meanwhile, *Shadow Warrior 3*'s idea of Japan is an unbroken sea of pagodas and Buddha statues, nestled in a landscape of mountain pillars that looks inspired by a distinctly Chinese karst range. It feels like just as much of an exaggerated parody as the soundtrack, or Lo Wang himself. No game needs true-to-life accuracy. But it shouldn't leave me wondering, again, whether someone even thought to involve any of the real people from the real places being reduced to a hollow fantasy land.

I don't think *Shadow Warrior 3* cares. It's content with a Polish studio's homogeneous, nonspecific idea of what 'Asian' looks like. It's comfortable knowing plenty of players will, even in the wake of a global rise in anti-Asian xenophobia, enjoy it without discomfort. After all, Lo Wang is the hero here.

In one cutscene, the camera pulls back to reveal Lo Wang's censored groin. Then he farts. That pretty much sums it all up. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A throwback shooter with an outdated punchline protagonist

DEVELOPER
Flying Wild Hog

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

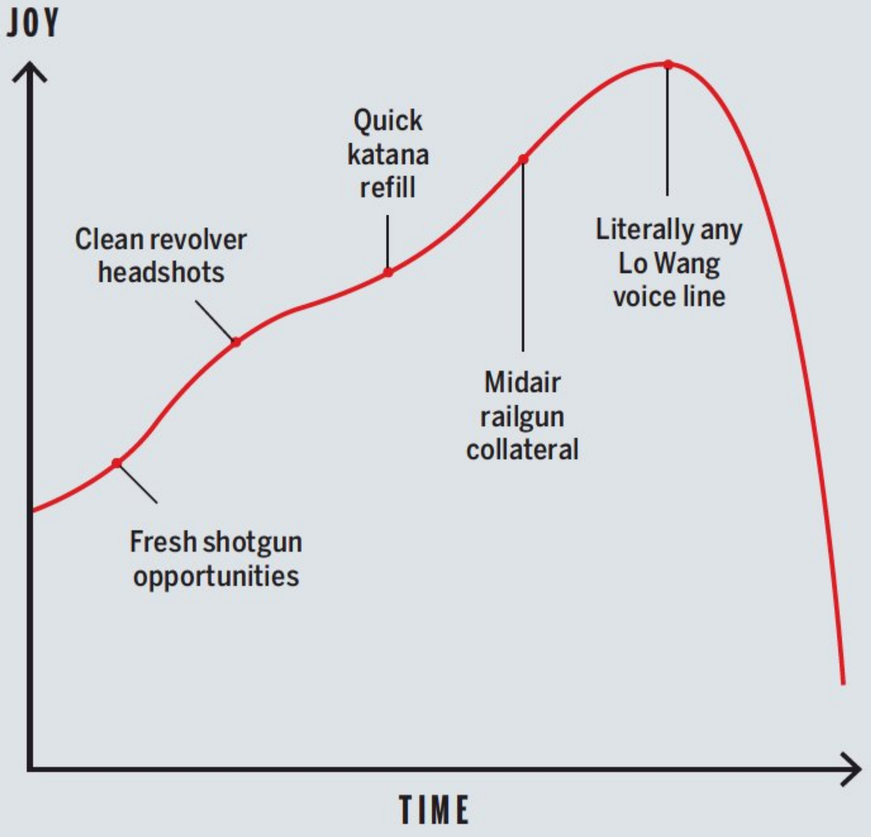
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 8700K, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shadowwarrior.com

THRILL KILLER

The typical timeline of Wang combat



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Shadow Warrior 3 **buries a fun shooter so deep in muck that it's not worth dirtying your hands with its utter nonsense.**

52

Intro

Tech

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

079 MSI SPATIUM M480 PLAY
080 FLIGHT STICKS
086 STEERING WHEELS

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

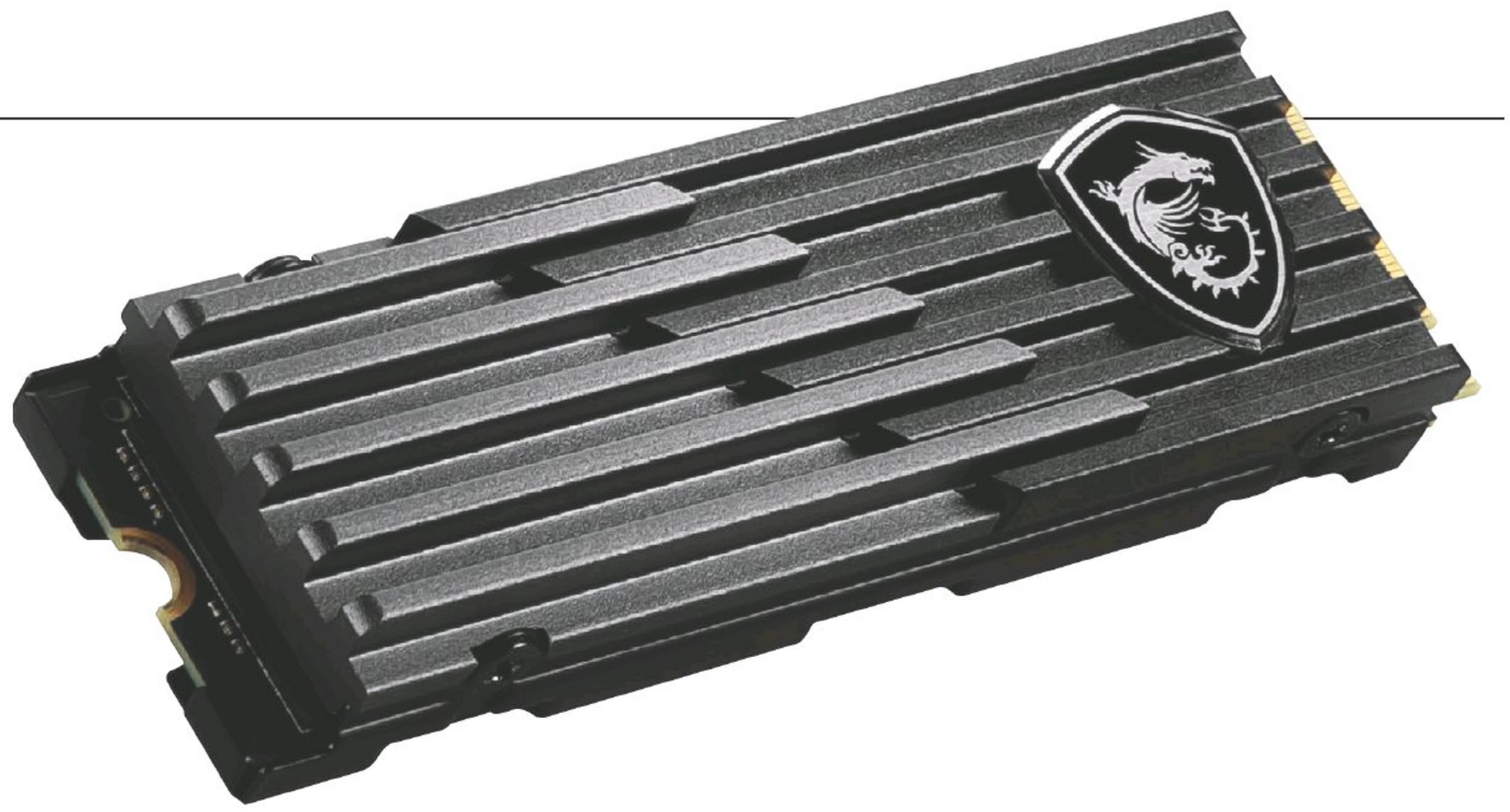
CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU CORSAIR.COM
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER WWW.CORSAIR.COM.AU

SSD

MSI Spatium M480 Play 2TB

The Spatium M480 gets an upgrade.

PRICE $499 **ONLINE** www.msi.com



Last year, MSI entered the high performance SSD market with a bang. Its Spatium M480 drive performed well against its competition, blending form and function, although we felt its launch price was a little high to earn an unequivocal recommendation. Fast forward to 2022 and the Spatium M480 has received an upgrade from Micron 97-layer NAND to the latest and greatest 176-layer chips. It's also built with PS5 compatibility in mind, making it a high performance and versatile option. But the competition hasn't been sitting idle either.

In the latest *APC*, we reviewed the Silicon Power XS70. The MSI is all but identical as is the case with just about every high performance Phison-based drive. The M480 Play is a 2280 (80mm length) M.2 drive. It makes use of Micron 176-Layer TLC NAND and a Phison PS5018-E18 controller. It's got 2GB of DDR4 DRAM onboard. It's rated for 7,000/6,80MB/s sustained read and write speeds but that seems to be a bit conservative. The 2TB model is rated for 650K/700K read and write IOPS.

The 2TB model we're testing comes with a 1400 TBW endurance rating and a five-year warranty. This fits in with most of the drives we've tested recently. You get Trim support and S.M.A.R.T. monitoring and in a welcome inclusion, AES256 hardware encryption support, which is something that many competitors lack.

MSI has tweaked the design of the heatsink to ensure PS5 compatibility. It's subtle black design will blend in well with the company's motherboards. The first Spatium M480 delivered a very cool 56c operating temperature while the Play delivered a peak reading of 61C. That's a great result given the Play is the faster of the two.

When it comes to performance, we'd expect the M480 Play to perform much the same as other 176L Phison E18 equipped drives, and that turns out to be the case. Drives like the Spatium, Seagate FireCuda 530 and Kingston KC3000 are essentially all tied with one another. The Kingston just has the edge in read performance, while the MSI performs very well at write operations, much like the non-Play M480 does. In the end though, the differences are largely negligible, and that makes things like the design, software and most importantly, value for money the key purchase considerations.

SPECS: MSI Spatium M480 Play 2TB M.2 NVMe SSD; PCIe 4.0 x4; Phison PS5018-E18 controller; Micron 176L TLC NAND; 7000 MB/s sustained read, 6800 MB/s sustained write, 650K/700K read/write IOPS; 1400 TBW endurance; Five year warranty.

The MSI Spatium M480 Play is priced at $499 for the 2TB model. At that price it's main worry is the cheaper Samsung 980 Pro, which is still a very good drive. It just happens to be the same price as the Silicon Power drive. But which should you go for given that performance is largely identical? We'd say the inclusion of AES256 encryption and Actiphy backup and restore software means the MSI gets the nod.

The MSI is a fast and cool running drive. It looks great and it's reasonably well priced at $499. We're happy to recommend it, but whether you go for it or not depends on what happens to be well priced on the day you look to purchase it. You might want a PS5 drive, or a heatsink-less drive to install under a motherboard heatsink. SSDs are becoming commodity products. If you do choose the MSI, you won't be disappointed.

CHRIS SZEWCZYK

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The MSI Spatium M480 Play brings flagship performance down to a new low price point.

90

Indictaes Best Result

	Crystal Disk Mark		Anvil Storage Utilities								Internal File Copy	Final Fantasy XIV: Stormbringers
	Sequential Read MB/s	Sequential Write MB/s	4K Random Read MB/s		4K Random Write MB/s		4K Random Read IOPS		4K Random Write IOPS		30GB of mixed file sizes	Scene Loading Time
			Queue Depth 1	Queue Depth 4	Queue Depth 1	Queue Depth 4	Queue Depth 1	Queue Depth 4	Queue Depth 1	Queue Depth 4		
Kingston KC3000 2TB	7386	6891	83.07	328.70	274.77	993.65	21266	84146	70341	254375	25	7.551
MSI Spatium M480 Play 2TB	7359	6870	81.61	323.50	281.47	972.24	20816	82841	72057	249020	25	7.583

GROUP TEST

JOYSTICKS

Don't get into a flap deciding on a joystick to round off your flight sim experience. *By Katie Wickens*

Whether you're making loop-de-loops in a Pitts biplane, or going long-haul in a Boeing 747, it's imperative that your flight sim sessions are piloted with precision. Sure, there are no real passengers around to persecute your flight control peripheral choice, but imagine the distaste if another pilot were to enter your cockpit and find only a mouse and keyboard.

For the full flight simulation experience you're going to want to snatch yourself a well-engineered Hands-On Throttle and Stick (HOTAS). Or for a more realistic approach (pun intended), a full-on yoke system might be the thing to get your propellers going. Whatever your flying style, there's a joystick for you. And to make the choice easier, we tested the following for their feel, functionality, build-quality, and all-important action.

THE DEDICATED EJECT BUTTON HAS TO BE THE TRUE SELLING POINT

2

Mach 1 HOTAS Combo

RAPTOR **$289**

All the buttons you need within a thumb stretch

1 As a no fuss combo purchase, the Mach 1 HOTAS is a hot option. In testing I was never without a button to assign and yet the design doesn't feel too complex. All the action buttons and hats are in reach of your thumb and fingers. There's no need to reassign oddly mapped controls when you plug in either – in *Microsoft Flight Simulator* at least it doesn't try to add its own control scheme, so you can avoid some stress in making it your own.

Once you're in and flinging the stick around in your game of choice, its heaviness combined with the non-slip pads mean that mounting doesn't feel necessary. The electromagnetic sensor gives it an impressive accuracy, as well as the added durability, and although the X-axis action is a little clunky, it's a smooth experience. The buttons also have a very satisfying click to them.

Seeing as the stick and throttle come as a pair, you can use the passthrough on the throttle base, the downside unfortunately being you can't buy the stick separately.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Durable and sturdy
- Heaps of buttons
- Smooth Z- and Y-axis action

SPECS TYPE: THROTTLE AND STICK / **BUTTONS:** 32 / **HATS:** 2

Mach 2 Flight Stick

RAPTOR **$209**

Superbly smooth and professional looking

2 The Raptor Mach 2 is a little hard to find in the US but, unlike the Mach 1 HOTAS, you can actually buy it separately from the throttle quadrant. The drawbacks being you can't use the throttle passthrough, and it costs almost as much for the stick alone as it would for the Mach 1 HOTAS combo, despite the latter seeming to have more going for it for the price.

The Mach 2 flight stick does redeem itself somewhat in terms of impeccable action and accuracy, however it is still a little lacking on the button front. Although the buttons (and single hat) aren't as easy to access as the Mach 1's, and there are less to play with, FR-Tec has added a double layer of mode switching for extra flexibility. All that layering up of actions can get a little confusing while you're playing a simulator, though. But there's still a very handy safety lock feature to prevent friendly fire, and the joystick does look like it was ripped straight out of an aircraft. In fact, the dedicated eject button has to be the true selling point, right?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Safety lock and Z-rotation
- Mode switching with two levels
- Looks like it belongs in a helicopter

SPECS TYPE: THROTTLE AND STICK SOLD SEPARATELY / **BUTTONS:** 29 / **HATS:** 1

EACH HAND HAS ACCESS TO TWO TRIGGERS, TWO HATS AND A BUTTON

VelocityOne Flight Universal Control System

TURTLE BEACH **$479**

Jam packed with buttons and features

3

The VelicityOne Flight Universal is an example of Turtle Beach's tendency to pack more features than necessary into a design, while overlooking the build quality. That doesn't mean I wouldn't recommend it, but for over $479 it's a little wobbly where the throttle attaches, and it's got a slightly toy-like aesthetic. That said, it's customisable flight instrument panel and built-in LCD display are a testament to just how much it has going for it over your average control system.

Not only is it compatible with both PC and Xbox, the throttle and yoke both have smooth action and a comprehensive array of buttons, sliders and levers with swappable knobs. Each hand has access to two triggers, two hats and a button on top of all that, which is more than enough. That's alongside all the goodies packed into the throttle quadrant. And while the profile selection is great, those wishing to start over with their own control scheme will have to do some remapping.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Built in mount is super user friendly
- Action is smooth
- Profiles help to get it set up faster

SPECS TYPE: YOKE AND THROTTLE QUADRANT / **BUTTONS:** 40 / **HATS:** 4

TCA Yoke Pack Boeing

THRUSTMASTER **$749**

Super close to the real thing, but almost as pricey

4

The TCA Yoke is supremely professional. It's sleek with impressive action and a gorgeously smooth, pendular swing on the control column. That's really noticeable when you pull back and push forward on the control – it's not like the boring linear motion of most. If it wasn't plastered with Xbox branded buttons, and was a little bigger, it could be easily mistaken for a real Boeing airliner yoke. It covers all the bases without feeling complicated and is topped off with impressive build quality.

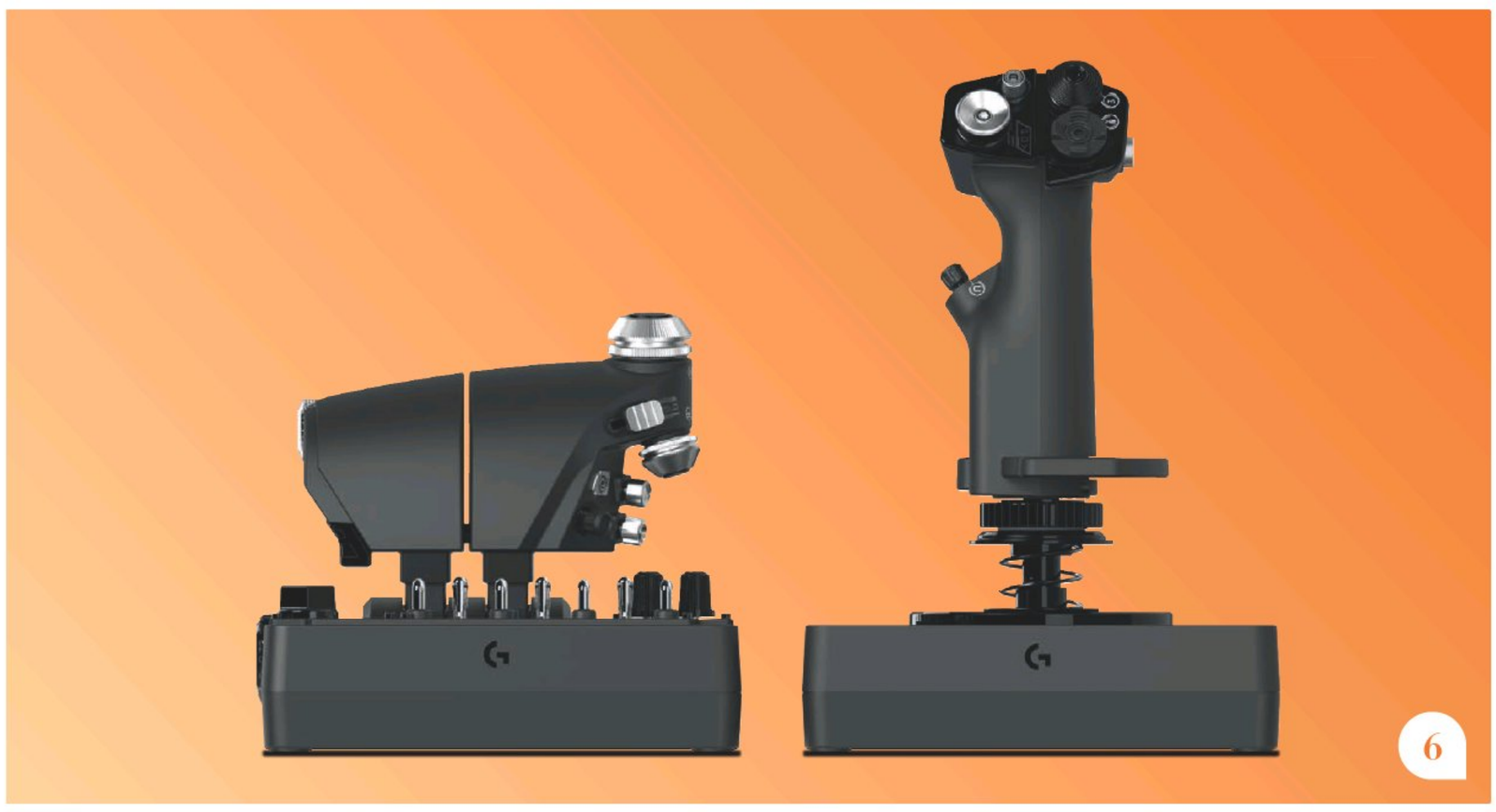
The built in mount makes it a cinch to set up, and there's no need to mount the throttle really as they're quite stable. The yoke sits low between your legs, adding to the realism, and one of the hats is even an analogue stick for smoother POV.

All in all, despite some minor gripes with the odd button levers on the back of the throttle arms, the TCA Yoke Pack Boeing meets all the expectations of a practically pro-level yoke. However I would have liked some trigger sensitivity for the money it costs.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Beautifully smooth action
- Ergonomic, sturdy and professional
- Swappable levers

SPECS TYPE: YOKE AND THROTTLE QUADRANT / **BUTTONS:** 35 / **HATS:** 2



WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN A JOYSTICK FOR SPACE FLIGHT?

Barrelling around in space is a far cry from your standard jaunt across the stratosphere. To stand a chance at getting out of a space battle alive, a joystick packing Z-axis rotation is a huge game changer.

Traditional joysticks will come with pitch and roll control – forward, back, left and right – but some stalwart specimens are configured for 3D movement. With the ability to twist the stick clockwise or anti-clockwise, you can control yaw: a vital ingredient for accuracy, especially when you're zeroing in behind an escaping Sidewinder in Elite.

Z-rotation will give you that extra dimension of control for intergalactic escapades, and even comes in handy for terrestrial flights, should you tire of flinging yourself around in the vacuum of space.

TCA Sidestick Airbus

THRUSTMASTER $99

Flight stick with a European twist

5 If you're not a fan of Boeing's yoke flight system then a flight stick will be more your speed. The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick doesn't look particularly space-age, being a rough replica of the controls of an Airbus A320. However, for a commercial flight sim experience with a European twist, it's the way to go.

The Sidestick definitely looks the part of a flight stick from 15 years ago but it came out just in time for *MS Flight Sim*. That means it's compatible with modern PCs and games. I will say like many of those sticks from the past it does suffer a little from mass key confusion – there are no labels showing which button is which and you'll have to get to grips as you go.

The Sidestick offers a fluid movement for when you're trying to touch down in prevailing winds, and it's comfortable to hold over long periods. At an affordable price it's a good pick, and should see you filling out the air hours required for your licence with ease. You do have a licence, don't you?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Gives a solid flight sim experience
- Additional throttle accessory
- Ambidextrous

SPECS TYPE: STICK AND THROTTLE SOLD SEPARATELY / **BUTTONS:** 33 / **HATS:** 1

G X56 HOTAS RGB

LOGITECH $449

A weapon of a joystick with some oddly-placed seams

6 The X56 HOTAS is an impressive evolution of the prior Saitek design, without omitting any of its great features. The throttle can be unlocked to provide inputs for left and right engines individually and the metal switches and knobs on the throttle feel super satisfying. And although there's a little more plastic than you expect from something like this, it's still sturdy. The seam running along the handle can feel a little jarring though, especially considering the quality present across the rest of the design.

The whole thing is deceptively light and both the throttle and stick have a slight tendency to slip around, but the X56 allows you to affix it to nearly any surface with the appropriate hardware. It even comes with some suction cups if you don't want to wreck your desk. The stick tension is adjustable, and with 180 programmable controls it's more than capable of taking on whatever flight simulator you throw at it. And it does so in style, with incredibly smooth action to boot.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Clean design
- Durable hardware
- Lots of switches and knobs

SPECS TYPE: STICK AND THROTTLE / **BUTTONS:** 31 / **HATS:** 5

GROUP TEST

RACING WHEELS

Wheels to stop you careening off the track and start your virtual racing career off right

By Jacob Ridley

In my opinion there's no better peripheral for your PC than a racing wheel. I enjoy VR headsets, though they're pretty great even without a PC at hand; and a flight stick really feels crucial to a fun flight sim experience. But it's the racing wheel that I find myself using most often – so much so that one is a permanent fixture on my desk nowadays.

There are many different racing wheels vying for your cash, however. You'll find multiple varying underlying technologies powering each wheel available – each with their own positives and negatives, fans and critics. I've tested and reviewed six of the best on the market to see which is really going to deliver a true-to-life tyre-screeching experience for avid and casual driver alike.

GT DD Pro

FANATEC $1,229

Direct-drive world champ

1 The Fanatec GT DD Pro sets a high standard for all racing wheels. With a direct-drive motor it's capable of throwing the wheel around with so much force you're holding on for dear life. Trust me, you want that. You feel every bump or loss of traction with the GT DD. I noticed my own lap times started improving once I could really hone in on where I was losing grip and speed during a lap. Granted, I had a few meetings with the barriers along the way, but I felt like I was really able to develop my race as a result.

The GT DD's construction is pretty much immaculate. The wheel base is this solid metal, passively-cooled monster, and into that slots a simple and sturdy clamp. The wheel itself is one of my favourites of all those I've tested, delivering a banquet of buttons that are easy to get familiar with. The included CSL Pedals don't come with a clutch nor a load-cell brake. Though you can upgrade to a load-cell kit sold by Fanatec, which replaces the brake and leaves the spare brake to become a clutch pedal.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- **Accurate, powerful force feedback**
- **Excellent build quality**
- **Direct-drive for less**

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** DIRECT / **PEDALS:** 2, UPGRADEABLE WITH LOAD-CELL + CLUTCH / **TUNING:** VIA DESKTOP APP, WHEEL

T248

THRUSTMASTER $599

Budget wheel for serious drivers

2 The Thrustmaster T248 is a far more budget-friendly option to the Fanatec GT DD, but it doesn't let up where it counts. The force feedback it delivers is a lot more impressive than you might expect and it's exceptionally accurate. Inside the T248 you'll find a hybrid force feedback system that utilises a gear alongside a belt. That pretty much covers off the downsides of the geared system, which have been known to feel clunky at times, but still has all the benefits of a belt system. Plus that keeps it cheap.

The T248's hybrid system has appeared to come at the expense of some of the finer touches, however. The build looks and feels cheap. Similarly, it's awfully loud, especially the shifter paddles. These are, however, incredibly responsive, like nothing I've used before. The T248 gets a lot technically right, and when it really comes down to it I'd take precision over aesthetics any day. If you want to develop your racing ability and learn to corner consistently, this is the best wheel to do it on a tighter budget.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- **Technically impressive**
- **Surprisingly powerful force feedback**
- **Hybrid design feels great to use**

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** HYBRID (BELT/GEAR) / **PEDALS:** 3, WITH 4 BRAKE TUNING MODES / **TUNING:** VIA WHEEL

1

2

WHAT MAKES A GREAT PEDAL SET?

There was a time when pedals bundled with your average racing wheel were an afterthought, but that's no longer the case. Most competitive wheels today make a big fuss on getting their pedals to feel realistic and last a long time.

The brake pedal is what you'll find most of that effort goes toward. Top kits mimic a real car with a load-cell brake pedal. These use pressure measurements to accurately relay your furious stomping into the game. Cheaper sets may try and feign this by using springs or squishy foam to gradually increase the pressure required to depress the pedal. The best pedals are often simply the ones which are easily customisable. If you can ease up on the braking pressure to suit your style, you'll be cruising happily for longer.

4

G923

LOGITECH $499

Easy to use and simple to set up

3

The Logitech G923 comes from a long line of very similar wheels. That's both a blessing and a curse. The actual tech powering the G923 is a little lacking next to newer models, such as the T248, though it's widely supported in games and has been fine-tuned to a high grade.

The Logitech G923 uses a dual gear-driven system, meaning it's a little less refined in its feedback than some. It is very impressive how it manages to transfer relatively minor vibrations through the wheel to give you the sense of driving on a real track, however, helped along by its proprietary TrueForce feature. The included brake pedal really requires some stomping to put to the metal, which is a plus, and the included carpet grip system helps keep this set firmly in place. With a high standard from wheel to pedal, the G923 is a real all-rounder. It's better suited to casual racing games and throwing around in *WRC 10* than some of the others I've tried out, though. The more serious racer may prefer the T248.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great build quality
- Pedals are great on carpet
- Zero fuss compatibility

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** DUAL-GEAR / **PEDALS:** 3, WITH CARPET GRIP SYSTEM / **TUNING:** VIA LOGITECH G APP

WITH A HIGH STANDARD FROM WHEEL TO PEDAL, THE G923 IS A REAL ALL-ROUNDER

T300RS

THRUSTMASTER $649

A PCPP favourite

4 The Thrustmaster has sat as our #1 pick for the best racing wheel for a few years now. Even though it's a little older, having originally been released in 2014, it's still plenty deserving of a top spot in 2022. The T300 RS has aged better than a lot of modern tech, with mods and support aplenty.

The fact you can even pick up a T300RS today is a miracle, but what's better is that you'd be buying a dual belt-driven design for highly responsive force feedback that remains impressive to this day. It delivers smooth response from the track with the benefits of the extra power that only a belt-drive system can deliver in lieu of a bigger motor. The wheel on the T300RS can also be removed and replaced, which isn't something you can do on the T248. The T300 RS is pricier than the T248, however, and doesn't come with a clutch pedal. That's the trade-off you have to make here: more impressive force feedback and a removable wheel at the expense of the mod cons. There's a good case to be mad, but you could also get the T300RS GT Edition if you want the best of both.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- **Excellent dual-belt design**
- **Removable wheel**
- **Widely supported**

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** DUAL-BELT / **PEDALS:** 2, UPGRADEABLE / **TUNING:** VIA DRIVERS

TMX Force Feedback

THRUSTMASTER $279

A cheaper way to get into racing

5 Cheap racing wheels are easy to come by; cheap racing wheels worth your money are not. Thankfully, we once again can turn to Thrustmaster for an option here. The TMX isn't as flashy as most – you're really trimming back to basics. The pedal set is pretty slim with just two unexciting levers on a plastic base, and the wheel itself features only the absolute basic buttons you'll need to operate it in-game and nothing more. It's slimmed to the bare essentials, but really that's what we want at this price.

That's because what really matters is the force feedback within, and the TMX shares its belt-pulley system with the popular T150. It's definitely a less powerful system than the other Thrustmaster and non-Thrustmaster systems on this list, but it's present enough that you'll be thankful it's there.

With the TMX you can be sure you're making a good start in your sim racing career, and if it ends up in a cupboard most of the year, you won't feel too much regret thanks to its wallet-friendly price tag.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- **Affordable**
- **Focus on the essentials**
- **Basic inputs**

FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** BELT-PULLEY / **PEDALS:** 2, UPGRADEABLE / **TUNING:** VIA DRIVERS

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KEEPING THE PEACE IN JUST CAUSE 4

Can't everybody just get along?

By Luke Kemp

When your home is ruled with a ruthless dictator's tightly-clenched iron fist, this is *not* an excuse to engage in needless violence. When evil rears its ugly head, you should always engage it in polite debate. That's how the Nazis were defeated in World War II, after all. My Rico therefore is an odiously – er, admirably – determined centrist, on a quest to defuse conflict at every opportunity; and I think I've found the perfect way to do it.

One of the rebels tells me to raise an "army of chaos". The idea is that the more trouble I cause across the island – handily tracked by a Chaos Meter at the top of the screen – the more people will rally to my cause. Traumatised by the needlessly violent intro mission however, I don't want help from the sorts of horrid individuals that would be attracted by that behaviour. Instead, I'm on my way to find and collect the cow gun as peacefully as possible. Yes, cow gun. This is a gun that turns people into cows. And you know how many violent conflicts have been started by cows? Less than seven. Let's do this.

A little research tells me that the cow gun is located in the Vaivenes region of the island. Opening up the map, it looks distressingly far from my starting point of Hanasacha. Nonetheless, I have a powerful grappling hook, a parachute, and a wingsuit. I'm confident of getting there relatively quickly, and in style. So off I go.

My initial plan is to hitchhike, *Just Cause* style. Not long after starting to jog along the nearest road, a car drives past that seems to be going in more or less the right direction. I use the grapple to hurl myself onto the roof. As soon as I do so, much to my surprise, the woman driving cries, "What are you doing up there? Go away!" I mean, it's a perfectly reasonable reaction, but many years of urban open world games have taught me to expect drivers that barely raise a digitised eyebrow at a stranger jumping onto the roof of their car. I apologise profusely, hop off, and allow her to continue on her way.

THE RULES

1. Keep the island as peaceful as possible by any means.
2. Do not kill anybody on either side under any circumstances.
3. Ensure the safety and happiness of all civilians I find.

CAUSE I SAID SO

Not long after, a rebel truck appears travelling in the same direction. These guys are my friends, *they* won't mind! And sure enough, when I jump onto the roof, the only reaction is for them to ask where I want to go. With no way of actually *telling* them, I'm happy for them to continue in the direction that they were originally going. Well, for about ten seconds, anyway.

An enemy helicopter appears, and starts to exchange gunfire with the truck. Horrified at the idea of somebody getting hurt on my account, I give the rebel manning the truck's turret a friendly tap with my grappling hook. Although this works pretty well – he stops firing, remains alive, and we even somehow manage to lose the helicopter, eventually – he grabs his head with both hands and, in obvious distress, shakes it to and fro non-stop for the full 60 seconds or so that I watch him.

I SPOT SOMETHING THAT LOOKS A BIT EVIL LAIR-Y AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

Somewhat disturbed, I jump back down to the road and give up on hitchhiking.

I decide to take a shortcut across the mountains instead, grappling towards the rock and then launching myself into the air with the parachute. It's pretty here; peaceful, too. In fact, looking down at the roads and surrounding area on my travels, the country of Solís seems rather calm overall, a clear indication that it's the overreaction of the rebels that is causing all the trouble. I become more determined than ever to put a stop to their shenanigans.

Having now covered a significant distance, I spot something that looks a bit evil lair-y at the top of the mountain range. Probably a government installation (and therefore trustworthy and harmless), but I make a detour just to check that everybody there is behaving. With several hundred metres still to go, however, heavy ordnance begins to rain on me without warning. I try to retreat, but it's no use; within seconds, I'm dead. Things look chillingly familiar when I respawn, and checking the map confirms it; I'm back where I started in Hanasacha. I let out a pained whimper, and start again.

I head back to the mountains, making sure to steer clear of whatever that building was. I'm trying to decide how much comfort I take in the knowledge that at least it's safe from rebel interference, when I spot a helicopter flying towards my distant marker. That'll be a perfect way to cover a lot of distance, and maybe I can hang from underneath without them even knowing I'm there! I give chase, but it's pretty fast. By the time I catch up, it's landed at some sort of enemy checkpoint. Before I can decide how best to approach the situation, I'm spotted, and under fire. Even worse, the Chaos Meter has triggered a multiplier! I really need to get out of here, and fast.

Not pictured: the goat I accidentally killed trying to tether it.

HELI LET LOOSE

The helicopter, which on my approach has taken off once more,

still seems my best bet. I grapple to the undercarriage, where I instantly find about half a dozen sniper lasers trained on my face like some sort of glowing acne. I have to make a split-second decision, so I hijack the helicopter. I don't see what happens to the pilot, so choose to assume that he is safe and well. I fly away, refusing to react to all of the bullets rather rudely being fired my way, and make good my escape.

The Chaos Meter has calmed down, I (probably) didn't kill anybody, and I now have a helicopter. Result! I have a brief scare when I'm almost at my destination, when I come under fire from a jet, but I quickly land and manage to lose them on foot. I grapple down from the top of the hill I landed on, carefully scope out the area, and then – I see it. The cow gun!

It is a thing of beauty. An assault rifle patterned like a Holstein cow (hey, I do my research), with infinite non-lethal ammo. I have an opportunity to try it out within seconds of picking it up. A military truck is parked nearby, and two soldiers jump out. They open fire and, with my new toy in hand, so do I. It works! Just one hit, and they each turn into a cow! But... *they keep attacking me!* This isn't what I wanted! I've just created a pair of Termoonators.

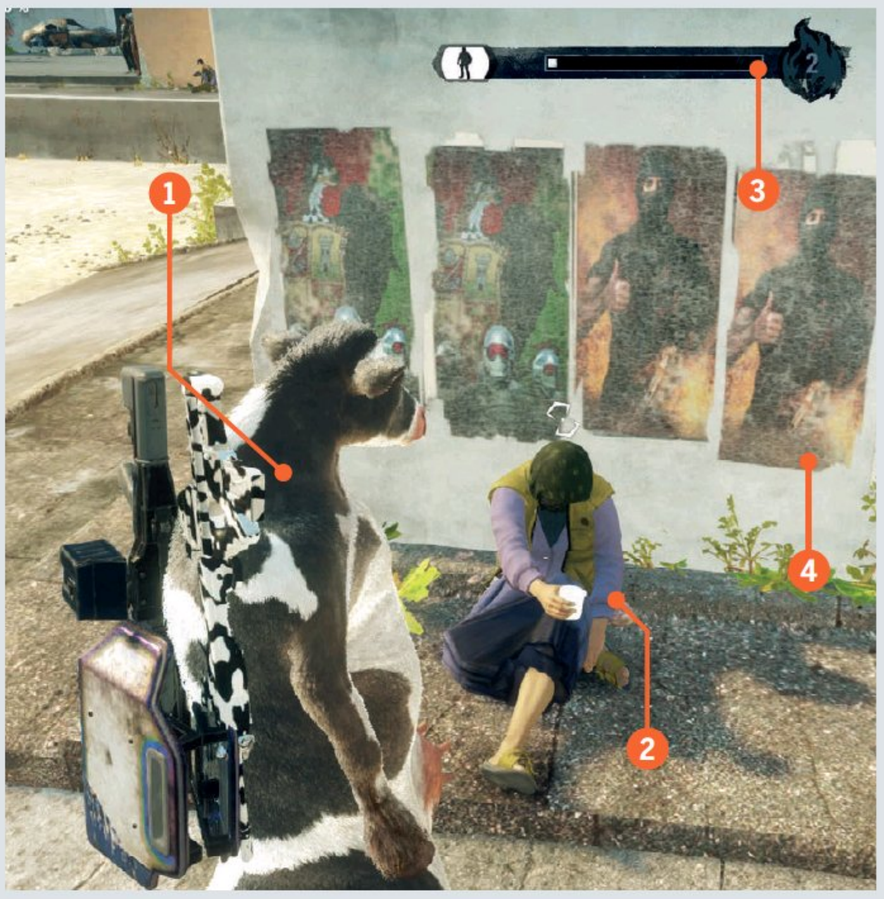
As they take cover behind a gate, one of the cows throws a grenade. I grapple to safety, hop the fence and quickly tether them together. This stuns them temporarily, so I steal the truck before they recover, trying to process what just happened. I don't get a chance though, as I soon find myself being chased by a group of military vehicles. One flies past me and straight into a Mini, which promptly explodes. "Terribly sorry!" I cry, guilty in the knowledge that was my fault.

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

The cow gun's secondary fire turns *me* into a cow, so I jump out of the truck, and use what I think is a pretty good disguise. Unfortunately, as I'm running away as fast as my little hooves will carry me, I'm hit by another civilian vehicle, which quickly catches fire and then (of course) explodes. The Chaos Meter is mocking me with another 2x multiplier. I desperately run, grapple and fly until, somehow, I manage to escape and coax the Chaos Meter back to normal.

FEELING COWED

The moment before the horrible accident



1 Me, being udderly oblivious to what's about to happen.

2 Her, just beef-ore it happened. Got her in a spot of bovril.

3 I've managed to keep cow-os relatively low.

4 I hoof to admit, I didn't notice these at the time.

I find that I'm now in the town of Vista Futura. A perfect opportunity to see what life is like for the average Solís citizen. Still in cow form, I come across an old woman begging, holding out her cup to passers-by. Now, she's holding out an empty cup, and I'm a cow, so... look, long story short, there is – fortunately for all involved – no udder-related button prompt. Before I can fully enjoy the wave of relief upon realising that I don't have to choose between comedy and decency, tragedy strikes.

I open my map to check the surrounding area. I'm distressed to see a "squads received" message as, despite my best efforts, the Chaos level has still crept up to 2. I tap B a few times to exit the map screen, but I tap it one too many times. As a result, I hurl my grappling hook into the poor woman's face at point-blank range, killing her instantly. Horrified at what I've done, I run further into town, changing back into less conspicuous human form.

It turns out that Vista Futura is a calm, peaceful place (apart from the recent unsolved murder of a homeless woman). Why on *Earth* would I want to sow chaos and ruin life for these people? Still, I do come across an unsettling sight, so of course I do my best to help.

I find a man terrified of... something. He runs around agitated, and knocks on random doors, begging for entry. Confusingly, at one point, a woman appears to be filming him on her phone before

BELOW: "Burger off and leave me alone!"

That's certainly not a holy cow.

I TAKE AIM AND TURN HIM INTO A COW, HOPING THAT THIS WILL CALM HIM DOWN

walking away. I could follow her – see if she's part of some nefarious scheme that this poor man is caught up in – but I decide to stick with him instead. I follow him around, and his behaviour doesn't change. He continues to run in agitation from door to door, occasionally stopping to hold his head in fear. Now, I'm thinking, *cows* don't usually look distressed, do they? You certainly never see them knocking on strangers' doors and/or holding their heads. Hmm...

MUST BE FRIESIAN

I take aim and turn him into a cow, hoping that this will calm him down. *And it does!* As soon as he assumes bovine form, he confidently and calmly starts to walk across the street on his hind legs. I stick with him to make sure he's OK, but his only concern seems to be the heavily armed man following him across town. I congratulate myself on a job well done, and move on to the nearby sports field.

I find three friends doing keepy uppies so, in the name of comedy, I turn them into cows. Unfortunately, it seems that the military takes a dim view of shooting citizens with *any* type of gun. Which is fair enough I suppose. I'm shot at instantly, and it takes less than a minute for multiple soldiers and military vehicles to appear, so I take a parked car and leave town to avoid endangering citizens. I hit somebody with the car on my way out, but they're probably fine.

I'm once again under fire from the ground and the air, but I'm feeling good. As the bullets whizz past and the rockets rain down, I smile. I helped people today, I made the island a slightly better place, and I did it (mostly) without violence. Once I'm in the clear, I'll return to Vista Futura, and settle down for a quiet life. Just me, my principles, and my surprisingly therapeutic cow gun. ■

FAR LEFT: That's some impressive parking.

LEFT: There goes the no claim bonus.

WHY I LOVE

What makes games special

PROGRAMMING ROBOTS IN

QUADRILATERAL COWBOY

Making little drones to do my bidding is super satisfying. ***By Morgan Park***

LEFT: Sniping from a grassy knoll.

RIGHT: Everything in *Quadrilateral Cowboy* feels appropriately analogue.

I never thought I'd say there are too many games about hacking to keep up with, but it's true. There are dozens of games on the subject, but the problem is a lot of them are pretty similar. More often than not, the whole game takes place in a computer terminal, where you execute all sorts of illicit commands that, in theory, are making something happen somewhere else in the world.

Like an actual hacker that lives oceans away from their target, it's a realistic interpretation, but it's also unsatisfying. I want to step out of the terminal and see the results of my clever coding, and no game does that better than *Quadrilateral Cowboy*.

It's a puzzle game about heisting valuables from hard-to-reach places, all with nothing but an '80s computer deck and a few gadgets. Levels start out simple, punching in rudimentary commands like "door3.open (3)" to make door 3 open for three seconds. This gets you used to your deck's command line, but things don't get really interesting until you unlock two robots: the weevil drone and the briefcase gun.

FUN WITH ROBOTS

The weevil can crawl through small spaces the player can't fit through to open a door or window. If this were any other game, it would be the type of drone the player directly controls, but your only way to communicate with this four-legged robot is through commands punched in on your computer deck.

Even getting the thing set up to move is a multistep process – first you need to set the weevil down somewhere, then start the appropriate program on your deck, set down your CCTV monitor within view of the deck, connect the weevil's camera feed to the monitor so you can see where it's going, and then start walking. You don't turn it by telling it left or right, but instead feed it degrees to adjust its radius ("turn -90" would be a full left turn).

Punching in every command one at a time can be tedious, but the game teaches you early on that it's smarter to type in several commands and separate them with a semicolon. Not only can this save on time, but it's also a fun test of your ability to guesstimate how far the weevil needs to travel without inching forward little by little. Like actual programming languages, you can also save typing time by recalling previous commands with the up arrow key.

THINGS DON'T GET REALLY INTERESTING UNTIL YOU UNLOCK TWO ROBOTS

SHARPSHOOTER

The briefcase gun, unlocked a few missions after the weevil, is even cooler. As the name implies, the gadget appears like a normal briefcase until you issue a 'deploy' command that reveals the small rifle turret within.

When I was given the briefcase gun, I naturally assumed I'd start seeing enemy guards to shoot, but it's actually a tool for pressing buttons from far away. Like the weevil, the gun's camera can link to the CCTV monitor for precise aiming. Fine tuning its aim can be a little tough because you need to input commands for its X and Y axis, but the fiddling is part of the fun here.

In one early level, you have to jack into a wall plug to open a high up window that happens to have a clear view of a button that turns off a laser grid. This is also where you're introduced to the 'blink' mechanic that lets you literally assign computer commands to eye blinks. Once I'd gone through the trouble of programming blinks, it felt super cool to blink once to make a laser grid vanish and blink twice to adjust the gun's aim to a higher button.

I wouldn't blame you if all of this programming sounds tedious. It does take some doing to get the simplest things done in *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, but that's the point. The puzzles are little more than new reasons to fiddle with your robots. The more you do it, the faster you get, the closer you feel to a god of machines that can bring a security system to its knees in the blink of an eye. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE July 25, 2016	**DEVELOPER** Blendo Games
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** blendogames.com/qc

HACK/SLASH

Our other favourite hacking games

HACKNET 2015
A story-based game about hacking into computers and gaining information. Played entirely from a computer screen.

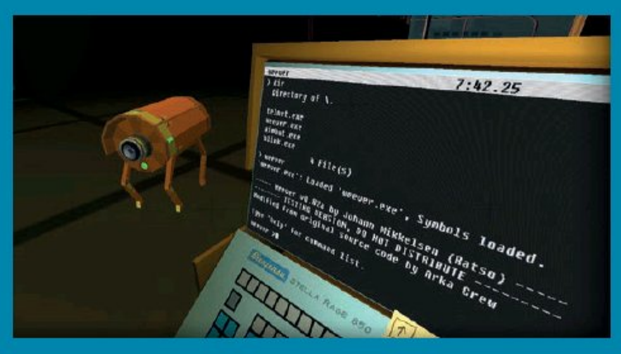
WATCH DOGS 2 2016
A great stealth game that employes drones and security cameras to infiltrate compounds.

DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED 2016
The hacking is fun and honing it can carry you through a lot of the game.

HACKMUD 2016
A hacking MMO that goes so deep that you may want to learn some actual javascript before giving it a shot.

LEFT: Deploying my weevil drone for his next adventure.

RIGHT: The weevil is basically a camera with legs that can remotely activate objects.



It's all over ...

EVEN WITCHIER

You've heard of Wolf, Cat and Bear, but what about these lesser-known **WITCHER SCHOOLS**?

HAMSTER SCHOOL

Pack their cheeks with potions before battle.

BEE SCHOOL

Will kill exactly one monster each before dying.

CAPYBARA SCHOOL

Monster-killing skills? Weak. Vibes? Impeccable.

GOOSE SCHOOL

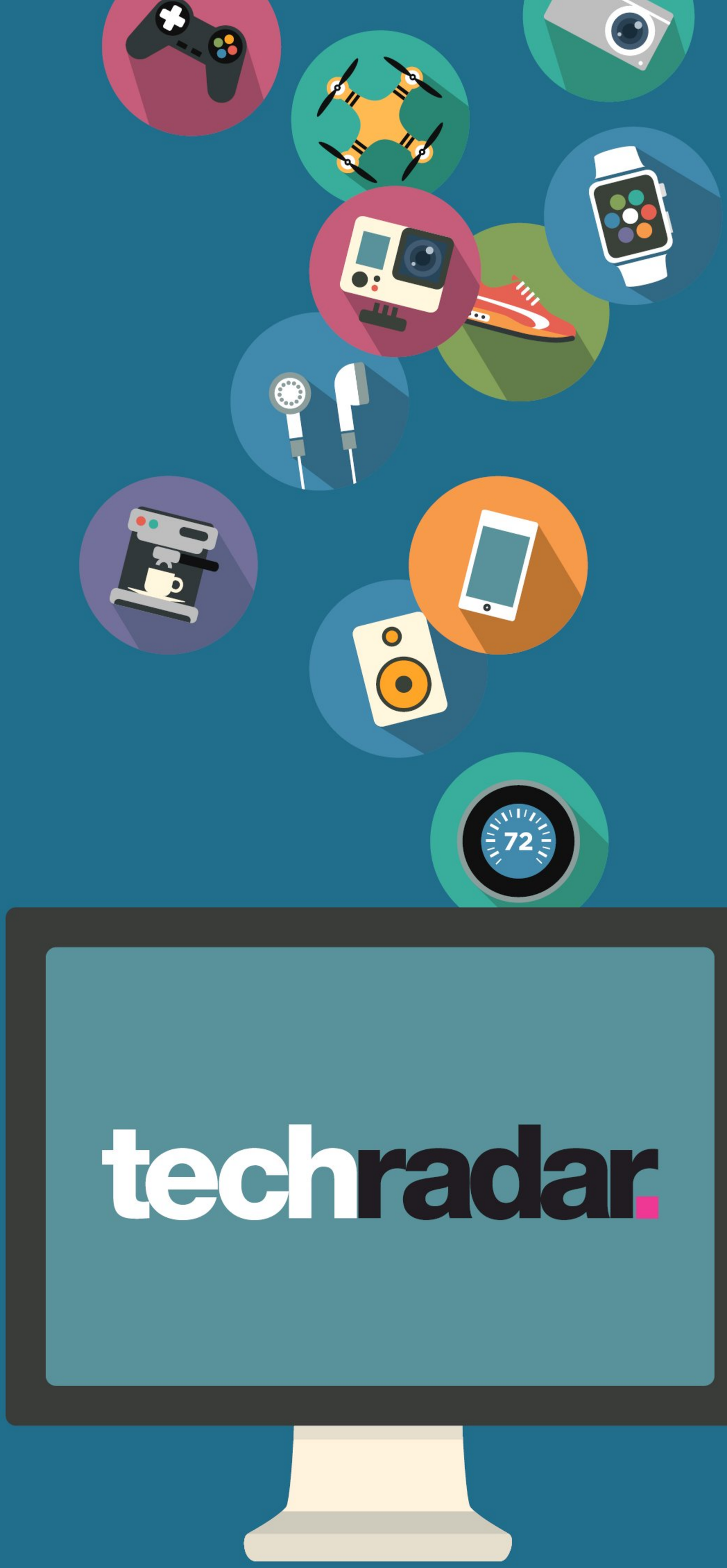
Ferocious, but known for ruining lovely days in the village.

SKUNK SCHOOL

Notorious for their potent Aard sign.

MEERKAT SCHOOL

Specialise in teamwork and horse insurance.



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